

From Gerry Anderson's
CAPTAIN SCARLET



the **ANGELS**

AND
**THE CREEPING
ENEMY**



ARMADA
PAPERBACKS for
Boys & Girls



No.3

SPECTRUM FILE

compiled by JOHN THEYDON

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THE ANGELS AND THE CREEPING ENEMY

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Gerry Anderson's

The Angels and the Creeping Enemy

by

JOHN THEYDON

**TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CHRIS HIGHAM**

**Armada Paperbacks
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We, the Mysterons, will destroy the Earth's food supplies!

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CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE SILENT SABOTEUR

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The Angels and the Creeping Enemy was first published in the U.K. in 1968 by May Fair Books Ltd, 14 St. James's Place, London, S.W.1, and was printed in Great Britain by Love & Malcomson Ltd, Brighton Road, Redhill, Surrey, England.

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CHAPTER 1

Melody Takes the Trail

MELODY ANGEL, a neat dark-haired figure in a tan trouser suit, crooned aloud to herself in a husky voice as she cruised south in her cream sports car along the main Georgia–Florida highway.

The speedometer read ninety. On the faster lanes, high-powered jetmobiles and hovermobiles screamed past. She regarded them with lazy brown eyes.

Let them go. She was in no hurry. There was plenty of time before she was due to rendezvous with the SPJ scheduled to pick her up at Cape Kennedy airfield.

She had enjoyed her short vacation back there in her old home town of Atlanta. It had been good to be just plain Magnolia Jones for a few days. But she had often found herself wondering how her old friends and neighbours, who believed she was working for a commercial airline, would have reacted had they known that she was Melody Angel, one of the five intrepid girl air aces who piloted the supersonic jets of the strike force of the world security organisation known as Spectrum.

Yes, it had been good seeing the old faces and places, but she wasn't sorry to be on her way back to Cloudbase. She was in fact a little surprised that she had not received an emergency recall earlier.

The Mysterons, the strange beings from space who had sworn vengeance for an unprovoked attack on their City Complex on Mars and were waging a slow war on nerves on the Earth, had been curiously inactive of late.

“Guess it could be the calm before another storm,” she murmured. “They don’t...”

She caught her breath and slammed on her air brakes as a powerful jetmobile hurtled from a side road at a cloverleaf intersection, ignoring her right of way.

“Crazy fool!” she exploded indignantly as she watched the car cross to the outer lane and scream away ahead of her. “If you don’t want to live, I do!”

At the state border she pulled into a service station. Her pretty dusky face tightened when she saw the same big black car being refuelled.

The driver wasn’t behind the wheel. Maybe the lunatic was in the restaurant having a snack, she thought. For a moment she toyed with the idea of seeking him out and telling him what she thought of his driving. Then she dismissed the temptation with a laugh.

“You might forget you’re a lady, honey,” she told herself.

Leaving her car to be refuelled, Melody went into the ladies’ powder room. When she came out a few minutes later a powerfully built dark-haired man in a cream linen suit and panama hat was sliding behind the controls of the black jetmobile. She checked, looking at him puzzledly. Where had she seen him before?

He was in his late thirties, she reckoned. His hard rugged face had a hint of ruthlessness about it—like his driving, she thought—his brown eyes held a cold impersonal glint as they briefly touched on her. For anyone who apparently lived in these sunny southern states, his face was strangely pale.

He paid the attendant, and then his eyes came back to her coldly assessing her. Melody, like all attractive girls, was used to men looking twice at her, but there was no admiration in those icy eyes that stared from that ashen face. There was something that sent a shiver along her spine.

The powerful motor of the black car roared into life, and then it shot away on to the highway, its driver showing a complete contempt for the other traffic.

“Guess he must be tired of life,” she thought, “or just not scared of being killed—”

She checked, her heart thumping madly. Suddenly she knew the truth. That ashen face, those cold eyes, that disregard for danger—a man who had good reason for not fearing death. If he hadn’t been wearing that cream suit, but a black uniform—No wonder she had thought his face familiar!

She dashed to her own car. The attendant had just screwed on the fuel tank cap. She slid into the driving seat, triggered the engine.

“Hey, wait!” the attendant yelled. “What about paying for the gas, lady?”

“Charge it to Spectrum!” she shouted back.

Then, with a snarl of exhaust, she sent the car hurtling out on to the highway, as recklessly as the driver of the black car. The attendant stood there with the fuel hose in his hand, staring stupidly as Melody’s car screamed south along the highway in pursuit of the black car.

“Spectrum!” he repeated dazedly. “Spectrum! Well, what d’ya know about that?”

Melody glanced at her speedometer. It was registering one twenty, but she was holding the black car, which was some three hundred yards ahead of her in the centre lane. The highway ran straight ahead like a white ribbon pinned tautly across the lush green Florida landscape.

She switched on the special service radio, pre-tuned to Cloudbase, and spoke into a microphone.

“Channel X07 please. Melody Angel to Colonel White. This is an emergency.”

A white light flashed on the fascia of the radio and from a tiny speaker a gruff voice crackled over the communicator.

“Colonel White to Melody Angel. What is it?”

She spoke breathlessly, her eyes still on the speeding car ahead.

“Sir, I believe I’m on the trail of Captain Black.” Even above the purr of the powerful engine she heard his sharp intake of breath.

“You just believe, Melody?”

“I’m ninety-nine per cent certain, sir. He’s not in uniform, or...”

“I understand. Give me the facts, please.”

She described her encounter with the ashen-faced man at the service station.

“I am now following him along Florida state highway 43. Spectrum reference S937W. Proceeding almost due south at one-two-zero miles an hour,” she added.

“Do you think he recognised you, Melody?”

“I don’t know—but he has never seen me out of uniform before to my knowledge, sir.”

“We’ll have to take a chance on it. We can’t afford to lose track of him. Keep on his tail. I’ll instruct regional Spectrum agents to rendezvous with you. They can then take over.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

“And Melody...”

“Sir?”

His voice softened a little, lost its official terseness. “Take it easy! No sticking your neck out unnecessarily. If your quarry is Captain Black you’d be safer stalking a black panther. Keep in touch.”

“Yes, sir!”

Melody switched off and grimaced comically at the radio.

“Don’t stick your neck out,” she said in a good imitation of the Colonel’s gruff voice. “Wait till the big strong men of Spectrum arrive and let them take over.” She pouted. “Does he think the Angels are made of sugar?”

Then she smiled. That was unkind. Colonel White knew they were tough enough—hadn’t he trained them himself? She suspected that deep down the Commander-in-chief of Spectrum had a soft spot for his five girl pilots, and didn’t like exposing them to unnecessary danger.

Besides, discipline was discipline. Without it Spectrum could never hope to succeed in its war against the Mysterons, and the Angels’ primary task was to fly the planes that were such a vital part of the organisation—not to behave as secret agents.

She turned her attention to the car ahead. A big red sportsmobile had overtaken her and was now between them. That was all to the good. There was less chance of her quarry suspecting she was trailing him if there were other cars between them, and there was no possibility of his turning off the highway without her spotting him. All she could do now was wait.

In the control room of Cloudbase, headquarters of Spectrum, hovering by means of atomic-powered jet engines forty thousand feet above the Earth, Colonel White looked at his personal assistant and communications officer.

“You heard that, Lieutenant Green? Which agents are within striking distance of Melody?”

The swarthy faced West Indian punched buttons on the long computer bank and studied the card that was ejected.

“Lieutenants Crimson and Emerald, sir. They’re patrolling in SPV 109 fifty miles west of Cape Kennedy.”

Colonel White frowned at the display map that lit up at a touch of a button.

“H’m. That means they’re approximately one-eighty miles from Melody’s reported location. She’s travelling south so they should rendezvous with her inside an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

“S.I.G. Brief them, Lieutenant. But first order Captain Scarlet to report to me.”

A few moments later Captain Scarlet entered the control room and at a sign from his chief sat on a stool which rose on a steel shaft from the floor.

Scarlet was Spectrum’s greatest asset in the desperate fight against the Mysterons, who had powers unknown and inconceivable to Man, including the power of recreating matter—animal, vegetable or mineral—that had been destroyed, the power known as retro-metabolism. Captain Scarlet himself had this remarkable ability to recreate himself, for he had been apparently dead and in the power of the Mysterons for several hours, but had been rescued by Spectrum agents. Now even serious wounds healed with amazing speed and he could not be killed by any normal means... he was virtually indestructible.

“Melody believes she has seen Captain Black in Florida,” the Colonel told him.

The Captain’s blue eyes gleamed. “So we can expect trouble, sir?”

“I suspect so—if Melody is right. But you’d better listen to her report.”

The Colonel played back the tape recording of Melody’s report.

“She sounds pretty definite, sir,” Scarlet said as his chief switched off. “Pity she didn’t have a Mysteron detector camera with her.”

“I’m going to assume that she is right, Captain. I’m not taking any chances. Neither am I waiting until the Mysterons send us a warning.” The

Colonel's craggy face tightened determinedly. "If we can get to Black and utterly destroy him we may be able to scotch their plans—and also eliminate their most dangerous agent on Earth."

Scarlet nodded agreement. Captain Black was a former member of Spectrum who had led the fateful expedition on Mars which had attacked the Mysteron complex. He had been killed and his body taken over by the Mysterons. They had sent him back to Earth as their number one agent to assist them in their war of revenge.

"With Black out of the way, sir, their claws would be clipped—if they've got any," Scarlet said with grim humour.

The Colonel frowned. "They'd find someone to replace him of course, but it would give us a break, Scarlet."

"What's on your mind, sir?"

"You will leave for Florida immediately, Captain. If and when Captain Black is positively identified, you will take charge of operations. Your objective will be his complete and utter destruction—beyond retro-metabolism."

"S.I.G., sir."

"Captain Blue will pilot your SPJ and will assist you at all times. Good luck, Captain."

Scarlet left the room and a few moments later a blue light flashed on the computer bank. The drawling voice of Captain Blue, the fair-haired American who was Scarlet's closest associate, came over the intercom.

"Request launch clearance."

"Spectrum is Green," replied Lieutenant Green.

A port opened in the roof of the bay which housed the Spectrum Passenger Jet. The plane rose on its hydraulic elevator to the launch deck and then catapulted away into the stratosphere.

On the Cloudbase flight deck the three Angel standby craft waited for orders, ready for instant take-off.

Sitting in the transparent cockpit of the leading craft, taking her turn of standby duty as pack leader, Rhapsody Angel, raised her hand in salute.

Below deck, in the Amber room, the luxurious rest lounge used by the five Angels, Harmony, the black haired, almond-eyed girl from Tokyo, looked up from her book at Destiny, the ash-blond French girl who was sharing standby duty with her.

“I wish Colonel White had sent us,” she said in her quiet musical voice.

Destiny smiled quizzically at her. “*Pourquoi?* You think we could handle Captain Black better than Captain Scarlet?”

“It is not that, Destiny. Our planes can travel so much faster than the SPJ.”

The French girl’s smile faded and she looked searchingly at her Japanese friend.

“You think that Melody may be in danger?”

Harmony shrugged her slim shoulders, her dark eyes troubled. “I do not know—yet I have a feeling I do not like.”

Destiny did not reply. Harmony came from the Orient. Sometimes she had strange premonitions. Destiny silently prayed that this time her comrade’s fears were ill founded. If anything happened to Melody...

As her car hurled across a flyover. Melody got a glimpse of a big town sign. Gainesville! It was here that she should have taken the highway that led to Cape Kennedy—but the man she believed was Captain Black was driving straight on along the main highway to Miami.

She glanced at her watch. It was about fifty minutes since she had left the state border. Soon the Spectrum patrol car containing Lieutenants Crimson and Emerald would be making contact. So far she had been in

radio contact only with Cloudbase through the closed channel, to reduce the chance of her quarry intercepting a message that would warn him that he was being followed.

Her lips tightened in a thin smile. If he was Captain Black, could she really hope that he was unaware of her pursuit? His Mysteron masters had their own uncanny ways of learning things. Her scalp crawled slightly at the thought that unseen beings might be watching her, coldly planning her destruction.

She braked sharply. The black car ahead had swung off the highway. As she followed into a minor road that lanced through a flat expanse of fields rippling with green young corn, she saw a signpost which said Talachu. She switched on the radio, called Cloudbase and reported the diversion.

“Talachu?” repeated Colonel White. “Hold on, Melody. I’ll check.” A moment later his voice again filled the communicator. “Talachu’s a lake in the middle of vast areas of swampland. There’s nothing for miles around except the occasional homestead.”

“Sounds cheerful. What’s happened to Lieutenants Crimson and Emerald, sir?”

“They hit trouble south of Silver Springs—a flash flood. They’ve had to make a wide detour. It may be some time before they can catch up with you.” The Colonel paused, his voice tensed. “Seems like you’ll have to handle this on your own for a while, Melody.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

“Just remember what I said about sticking your neck out. Captains Scarlet and Blue are on their way. Good luck!”

Melody smiled wryly as she switched off. Her feelings were mixed. She had wanted to see this through to some definite conclusion, if it was only to make sure that her quarry was Captain Black. But the possibility of having

to face Captain Black alone, backed as he was by the tremendous superhuman power of his Mysteron masters, sent a chill through her.

Then she set her jaw determinedly. She had to see it through. This was why she had been specially selected for Spectrum; why she had undergone rigorous, even ruthless training under Colonel White's command. She mustn't let him down!

From time to time the black car was hidden by grass tinged banks or numerous clumps of willow trees that cast long shadows across the minor road. But always when she thought her quarry had eluded her, the car loomed out of the shadows and sped on!

Now the cornfields were thinning out, the country on either side was becoming coarse grassland on which cattle and sheep grazed. She saw sedge grasses marking the invisible lines of dykes.

Presently, in the heat of the late afternoon sun, mists began to rise, obscuring the horizon and drifting across the low-lying fields.

The road wound on. The surface was not so good now. It had been long neglected. And the road appeared to serve only the mean homesteads that she occasionally passed.

Ghostly fingers of white began to probe across the road, and instinctively she closed the gap between her and the car ahead. For a long time now there had been no turning off, but she could not take the risk of there being one down which the quarry could sneak unseen.

As she went cautiously round a bend where the road dipped through a sluggish muddy stream, the mist swirled away and not a hundred yards ahead she saw the black car had stopped at the side of the road where the fields gave way to dark trees.

She swung her car hard against the low bank and cut the engine.

The mist closed in again.

She sat there in ghostly silence, listening, waiting for the sound of the other engine starting up again. There was nothing but the weird cry of a marsh bird, somewhere in the distance. She might have been alone on an alien world.

Closing the windows so the sound of her voice would not carry on the mist, she switched on the radio and called Cloudbase.

She reported to Colonel White. "I am going to find out what's happening sir. There's a wood ahead. He may be proceeding through it on foot."

"S.I.G. But be careful and don't take unnecessary risks, Melody. If that man is Captain Black, don't attempt to tackle him on your own. Understand?"

"S.I.G."

Melody alighted from the car, climbed the low bank beside her, and slithered down beyond it into the watery slime that was ankle deep.

As swiftly and silently as she could, she made her way along beside the road under cover of the bank. When she reached the point which she estimated was opposite the parked black car, she warily raised herself until she could peer above the rim of the bank.

Then she sank down with a startled gasp. She was right next to the car, and from it was emerging the man she had been following. She had no doubt now of his identity—for he was wearing a black Spectrum uniform.

CHAPTER 2

Melody Sticks Her Neck Out

PEERING THROUGH a spiky clump of sedge, Melody watched Captain Black. He seemed unaware of her presence.

He closed and sealed the door of his jetmobile and then took a path that led away into the cathedral gloom of the trees. After a few yards he was hidden by a bend on the path and she scrambled over the bank into the road and followed warily, her feet making no sound on the soft spongy turf.

She pressed a minute switch on her wristwatch. She had no radio to maintain contact with Cloudbase, as she could have done had she been in uniform, but the microscopic homing device, sending out a constant signal undetectable by human ears, would be picked up by Spectrum agents and pinpoint her position. The knowledge was comforting.

She moved stealthily round the bend, hugging the thick reddish trunk of a tree. Captain Black was moving purposefully along the path about twenty yards ahead. The prints of his knee-high black boots left a plain trail.

“If he does suspect he’s being followed,” she thought, “he’s making no attempt to cover his tracks.”

She went on, keeping to the cover of the trees as much as possible.

The massive trees soared up into a roof of thick foliage and boughs and twining creepers, which the sun rarely penetrated. The path was like a lofty, gloomy forbidding tunnel, winding its way into the unknown.

Presently the ground between the trees which were affording her cover became muddier. She felt it giving beneath her feet. Now she was forced to keep more to the path! But not once did the black-uniformed figure glance

round. Nevertheless, she allowed him to get out of sight, relying on that plain trail of footprints to guide her.



The forest was very quiet. No birds fluttered or sang. There was a brooding unnatural silence that set her nerve ends itching. Pools of water appeared now between the trees, stagnant pools that gave off a foul odour of rotting vegetation, and into the silence crept the hum of mosquitoes.

“Wherever he’s making for, it’s sure no health resort,” she muttered.

Her watch told her that she had been following Captain Black for ten minutes when the trees began to thin out to allow the hot rays of the

afternoon sun to shaft down and light up coils of mist which rose from the stagnant swamp on either side of the path.

The path itself seemed less firm, and once, treading unwarily, she missed the edge and was immediately calf-deep in slimy foul-smelling mud,

which oozed and bubbled when she quickly withdrew her foot. As the trees grew less dense, the water pools grew larger, joining. Mangrove-like trees appeared, straddling the muddy water with a snakelike tangle of roots.

She froze suddenly! A sinuous brown and beige shape slithered across the path and dropped into the water on the far side with a little plopping noise.

“Phew!” She gasped with relief. “Only a water snake.”

Then she realised that Captain Black had stopped some thirty yards ahead.

She flattened out behind a gnarled and twisted trunk, supporting herself above the oily brown water with a foot on each of two humped roots, and peered out. Beyond Captain Black the sun streamed down into what she thought was a large clearing, painting the trees bordering it with a mosaic of green and grey and yellow. Then, as her eyes adjusted themselves to the brighter light, she saw that the clearing was actually a lake, from which silvery mist was rising.

She remembered what Colonel White had told her. Was this lake Talachu?

The way to the lake was barred by a high fence of strong wire mesh. There was a gate in it and Captain Black seemed to be working on the lock with an instrument.

The gate swung open and he went through, closing it behind him. He went straight on, and for a moment Melody had the illusion that he was actually walking on the surface of the water. Then, as she moved nearer, she saw through the tenuous mist that he was walking on a narrow path raised a few inches above the placid surface of the lake.

The mist had swallowed him before she reached the fence. She found the gate unfastened and went through, treading cautiously on the narrow

causeway that divided the stagnant evil-smelling waters of the lake.

Presently, through the mist she saw a large hummock appear—a tree island. Captain Black was just climbing its shallow muddy bank.

She hesitated. Exposed on the narrow causeway she would be a sitting target if he should turn and see her. But when he vanished into the trees, she forced herself to go on. That island might not be his destination. And she had to find what that was!

Having made the decision, she moved swiftly now, anxious to reach the island, with its trees to bring welcomed cover.

But her haste was nearly her undoing. She placed an unwary foot on a slippery patch of mud and fell headlong with a force that drove her breath from her body. One outflung hand hit the water with a splash and only narrowly did she escape rolling into it.

As if the noise had been a signal, there was a sudden swirling in the water and above the surface appeared the ugly snout and wicked heavy-lidded eyes of a huge alligator. She withdrew her hand as if it had been stung. Panic clawed at her as she tried to force herself to her feet. If the hideous reptile crawled up on the path...

And then beyond the alligator the water boiled and from it rose a monstrous green and black-mottled snake head with open cavernous jaws. It was colossal, bigger than any anaconda she had ever seen. A nauseating stench touched her nostrils. She was reminded of tales she had read of the legendary sea serpents.

On hands and knees she watched, frozen with horror, as the terrifying monster heaved scaly coils from the water and wrapped itself in a stranglehold about the huge alligator, dragging it down. A brief flurry and then there was nothing but widening circles of ripples on the murky surface of the water.

Trembling, running with cold sweat, she got to her feet. She knew now what her fate would be if she fell into the water.

What manner of creature was that monstrous snakelike thing? she wondered, as she went on more warily towards the tree island. How had it got there?

Was that the reason for that high fence, to keep in such a monstrosity? Was this some kind of reservation?

With a little sob of relief she felt the firmer ground of the island bank under her feet. She climbed to the trees and looked back fearfully. Could a creature like that crawl ashore as anacondas and alligators did?

But the surface of the lake showed not a ripple now. It lay like an obscene mirror beneath the slowly drifting pall of mist.

It was only as she turned to follow the narrow but clearly defined track winding between the trees, that she realised that her watch had gone. It must have slipped from her wrist when her hand struck the water.

She checked, appalled by the discovery. That watch, with its subsonic homing signal, had been her last link with Spectrum. Now she was on her own!

As fear filled her mind she stopped to think. If she took the easy way out, waited here for the Spectrum agents to find her, Captain Black might be far away by then.

“You’ve just got to go on, honey,” she muttered, glad in that oppressive stillness to hear the sound of her own voice. “You’d never forgive yourself if something happened that Spectrum could have prevented, just because you got cold feet.”

And so she went on, following that path through the trees. Mahogany, she thought they were, tall and massive and very old, casting a sepulchral gloom that her taut nerves filled with menacing shapes. She thought she had

gone about a mile when suddenly the trees began to thin. Then through them she saw something gleaming in the sun, something that looked like a monstrous bubble as high as a house.

Warily she moved nearer, and then froze, her eyes widening incredulously. Set in the middle of a big clearing, behind a high plastic-concrete wall surmounted by what she thought was an electrified wire fence, was a great dome-like transparent building.

On the floor of the clearing, near a gate in the wall, stood a small two-seater helijet. And working on the lock of the gate with an electronic key, was Captain Black.

“What on earth is it?” she wondered. “What’s it doing in the middle of this swampland, guarded by creatures like that thing back in the lake?”

High over the western Atlantic, Captain Blue, at the controls of the speeding SPJ, spoke into his cap peak microphone.

“SPJ 13 to Cloudbase. Approaching Florida coast. What’s the latest on Melody?”

It was Colonel White who replied.

“Lieutenants Crimson and Emerald have reached the Talachu road. They were picking up Melody’s homing signal until a few minutes ago. They’re afraid something must have happened to her. Her latest recorded position was S4377W at Lake Talachu itself. How soon can you get there?”

Captain Blue glanced at his instruments. “Twenty minutes approximately, sir.”

“The SPV may make it before you. Let’s hope it’s in time.”

Captain Scarlet spoke into his microphone. “What is there at Talachu that could interest Captain Black, Colonel? I thought you said there was nothing but a few homesteads for miles around.”

“Sure, that’s what I thought, but Lieutenant Green’s been doing some checking. There’s a biological laboratory on an island in the lake. Belongs to a Doctor Sneddon.”

“Sneddon? I’ve heard of him. An authority on reptilian life, isn’t he?”

“Among other things. But he’s got a bigger reputation as a bacteriologist. He’s cagey about his experiments, never publishes anything until he’s a hundred per cent sure he’s achieved what he was aiming at. But he’s come up with some weird cultures in the past.”

“What would Captain Black want with him?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Scarlet, but I don’t like the idea of the Mysterons being interested in a fellow who can develop some of the off-beat bacteria that Sneddon has.”

“Have you alerted Sneddon that he might be in danger?”

“Impossible! He hasn’t a radio. When he goes to the lab he cuts himself right off from the outside world, immures himself there for weeks on end with one assistant.”

Scarlet frowned. “And the Mysterons would know that, of course. I don’t like the sound of it. sir.”

“I’m not exactly bubbling over with mirth, Captain,” Colonel White said grimly as he went off the air.

“Guess Melody could be in a spot,” Captain Blue said tersely.

“Yeah. I know we shouldn’t put personal feelings before the overall purpose of Spectrum, pal, but right now I’m more concerned for her than...” He glanced angrily at the controls. “Can’t you squeeze some more speed out of this confounded crate?”

Melody watched as Captain Black opened the gate in the concrete wall and entered. When he went from her sight she hurried forward and peered into the compound beyond. The domed building looked like a huge half-

bubble, the lower part of which was made of opaque greenish material. Through the clear plexiglass above, Melody could make out parts of scientific instruments and realised it was a laboratory. Captain Black was approaching the doorway of the building. It opened before he reached it, possibly activated by an invisible ray, then closed behind him. On impulse, Melody ran lightly towards the door. It opened and she entered, and stood back against the smooth translucent wall, letting her eyes become adjusted to the diffused greenish light that permeated the vestibule.

Then she saw Captain Black mounting a short flight of steps to a door in an opaque glass wall. It slid back as he reached the top step and he entered. She got a glimpse of long benches equipped with retorts and other scientific equipment, and of a grey-haired man in a white overall standing at a bench with his eye to a microscope.

In the laboratory, Doctor Sneddon spoke eagerly, without looking round. "Is that you, Ross? Come and look at this."

"I have not come here to look at that, Doctor," was the abrupt reply from Captain Black!

At the sound of that cold emotionless voice, the biologist jerked round, peering short-sightedly at the black uniformed figure by the open door.

"How—how did you get in here? Who are you?"

Captain Black moved forward from the shadow into the sunlight shafting down through the plexiglass dome. The professor fumbled for the glasses in the pocket of his overall and put them on.

Then he gasped. "Spectrum! You are an officer of Spectrum. But I still don't understand—"

"It is not necessary that you should understand, professor. I have come for Culture XO."

“Culture XO?” The scientist stared at him incredulously. “But—but how could you know about that? It is a secret known only to myself, not even shared by my assistant.”

“We know everything, Doctor.” Captain Black moved forward, holding out his hand, his dark eyes bleak. “The culture!”

Sneddon shook his head bewilderedly. “But I am not ready yet to make it known to the world. I have yet to find a bacteriophage that will destroy it. If this culture should get into the wrong hands the results would be terrible. Millions of people might die...”

“Exactly, Doctor! That is why we want it. This is a Spectrum order.”

The doctor frowned. “You do not trust me to guard my own secrets—is that it?” He sighed. “Very well. I must bow to your authority, backed as it is by the World President himself.”

He turned to a cabinet on the bench, spoke a code word that operated the electronic lock. He was about to pull out a small rack when Melody burst into the laboratory.

“Stop, Doctor!” she cried. “Don’t...”

Captain Black swung, a gun in his hand, and fired. A missile struck Melody in the shoulder. A wave of intense nauseating pain laced through her body, and then she crumpled and went down into oblivion.

Doctor Sneddon turned, staring aghast at the inert figure of Melody.

“A—a girl! You—you shot her down in cold blood! Why?”

Captain Black smiled coldly.

“Because she was going to tell you that I am a Mysteron agent, Doctor. If you had not been so short-sighted you would have seen my uniform is black.”

“A—a Mysteron? Then...”

With agility that belied his years, the professor swung back to the cabinet, but before he could slam the door Captain Black shot him twice in the back.

With a low moan the scientist sank to the floor, his nerveless hand falling away from the handle of the door he had failed to shut.

His face expressionless, Captain Black stepped over him, pulled the tray from the cabinet and took from it a sealed phial labelled XO.

He walked back to the door, looked down at Melody with cold eyes.

“I was aware you were following me, Earth girl. It suited our purpose that you should be allowed to do so. I could have killed you—but it is better that you live for now. We would not wish Spectrum to be entirely ignorant of what has happened here. As always we give you Earth people a chance to defeat our plans.” He laughed sardonically!

Captain Black walked through the doorway and out of the laboratory. Beyond the compound wall he entered the professor’s helijet and took off, flying towards the westering sun.

When Melody opened her eyes she was in the sick bay at Cloudbase, with Doctor Fawn smiling down at her.

“Okay, honey?” he asked.

“Sure.” She forced a smile. “My shoulder feels as though it’s been kicked by a mule, and I’ve got an awfully hungry feeling, but otherwise I’m fine. In fact I’m pleasantly surprised—I really thought Captain Black had shot to kill.”

“He fired a sleep missile into you, that’s all. Guess you were lucky.” He handed her a tumbler filled with a milky fluid. “Drink this and it’ll take away that hungry feeling—the after effects of the drug.”

Melody sat up and drank the potion with a grimace. But she felt better for it.

A nurse gave her a dressing gown and took her from the operating theatre. “Colonel White left instructions that you were to change into uniform and report to him as soon as you were fit, Melody.”

“Okay.”

When she reached the Angels’ private quarters she found Destiny there, stretched out on a couch, manicuring her nails.

The French girl raised her delicate eyebrows.

“*Ma foi!* For a corpse you look—how you say?—mighty swell.”

Melody laughed as she stripped off the dressing gown and selected one of her gold-trimmed white uniforms.

“I looked as bad as that, huh? Who brought me here?”

“Captain Scarlet. He and Captain Blue touched down at the laboratory in the SPJ.”

Destiny broke off, regarding Melody anxiously. “What is the matter?”

“The doctor? What happened to him?”

Destiny made a sad little gesture.

“I am afraid he is dead, the poor man,” she said. “But you had better hurry. Colonel White is impatient to see you.”

Melody frowned as she zipped up her tunic. “I’m on the carpet, is that it?”

Destiny shrugged. “What else could you expect? He told you not to—how you say?—stick your neck out, no?”

“But I had to, Destiny...”

“I believe you.” Destiny swung her legs off the couch. “But then I am a girl and I understand. The Colonel is a man. He may be more difficult to convince.” She stood up and put her arm about Melody’s shoulders. “*Allons!* I will go with you to give you moral support.”

When they reached the control room, Captains Scarlet and Blue were there with the Colonel and Lieutenant Green.

The Colonel frowned slightly at Melody. “Glad you’re all right, Melody. Spectrum can’t afford to lose you.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m sorry if I appeared to disobey orders...”

“Maybe you deserve a rocket, Melody,” he broke in with a faint smile. “But I’ll reserve judgement on your behaviour until I’ve heard your story. Please sit down!”

He touched buttons on his circular desk and two stools rose from the floor alongside Scarlet and Blue. The girls sat down and Melody told her story.

When she’d finished, Colonel White spoke slowly. “Under the circumstances I think you were justified in taking the risk you did, Melody. Your courage and devotion to duty are commendable. But I don’t understand why Captain Black didn’t kill you—as he killed the doctor.”

“The Mysterons never do anything without reason, sir,” Captain Scarlet put in.

“Exactly—and I find it hard to believe that Melody could trail him all that way without his knowing it.”

“It’s almost as if he wanted us to learn from her what happened—up to a point,” said Captain Blue.

“Well, we’ve learned that Captain Black demanded a culture known only to the doctor as XO,” Colonel White mused. “A deadly form of bacteria that, according to Melody’s story, could bring death to millions if it got into the wrong hands. So we can assume that Captain Black got away with the culture. Unfortunately the doctor’s assistant doesn’t know just what it is or what it can do...”

There was a burst of static from the monitor speaker on the computer before which Lieutenant Green sat. A cold expressionless voice filled the room. The Spectrum personnel froze!

“ATTENTION EARTHMEN! THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE MYSTERONS. WE KNOW THAT YOU CAN HEAR US. WE HAVE SWORN TO BE AVENGED ON YOU FOR YOUR UNPROVOKED ATTACK ON OUR MARS COMPLEX. WE ARE ABOUT TO STRIKE AGAIN. WITHIN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS WE SHALL DESTROY VITAL SOURCES OF YOUR FOOD SUPPLIES. MILLIONS WILL BE DOOMED TO STARVATION.”

CHAPTER 3

Destiny Leads the Way

AS THE MYSTERON VOICE ceased there was silence in the Cloudbase control room, broken only by the faint hum of the computer and the splutter of static from the monitor speaker.

The six members of Spectrum looked grimly at one another. Colonel White was the first to speak.

“So now we know. Vital sources of food supplies—that’s the Mysterons’ target.”

“They could strike anywhere—and everywhere,” Captain Scarlet said. “To guard every plantation, every arable region, every ocean farm would be impossible.”

“To say nothing of the hydroponic centres and synthetic food factories,” added Captain Blue.

“I think we can cut out the synthetic food plants,” the Colonel said. “They’re being run down because of the suspicion that artificial food is having a harmful effect on growing children. The swing is to natural food production. There are now more millions of acres under cultivation than at any time in the last century. As you know, vast derelict regions have been reclaimed, deserts have been made to bloom, frozen wastes have been thawed by nuclear power.”

“You’re right, sir,” said Scarlet. “The world could probably dispense entirely with synthetic foods now—and the Mysterons must be aware of the fact.”

“Moreover, this Culture XO can only be used to infect living organisms,” the Colonel went on. “The Mysterons might even use it against livestock or fish. Imagine what a catastrophe it would be if all the cattle in the world were infected by some virulent disease such as that known in the last century as foot and mouth...”

“Pardon, Colonel!” Destiny cut in. “Such a thing would be terrible—but it would not be the catastrophe, no?”

“Why not, Destiny?” demanded Scarlet.

She shrugged. “*Parbleu!* Perhaps the people would have to go without the steak and kidneys—but they would still have pudding, *oui?*”

Colonel White flashed her an admiring smile. “You’re right, Destiny! Man might not be able to live by bread alone, but he certainly couldn’t live on meat alone—not for long, anyway. But think what would happen to the teeming populations of the great Asiatic countries if the rice crop failed, to the western world if the corn crops failed.”

“Millions would be doomed to starvation—just as they were in Asia in the twentieth century,” Melody said. “And that is what the Mysterons threatened. But just what will this Culture XO do?”

“If we knew that, my dear,” Colonel White said grimly, “our battle would be half won. If only Doctor Sneddon had not kept his researches a secret! You say he left no notes, no tape recordings, of his work on this particular project, Captain Scarlet?”

“None that his assistant, Doctor Grove, could find, sir, although he searched the laboratory and the office thoroughly before we left.”

“The most obvious place,” volunteered Captain Blue, “was the electronically-sealed cabinet where the professor kept the culture itself—but that was empty. Doctor Grove is continuing the search with the help of

Lieutenants Crimson and Emerald. If he finds anything, he will let us know.”

Colonel White left his desk and walked into one of the great glass walled wings, staring down grimly at the glittering ocean far below.

“According to Melody’s story,” he said worriedly, “Doctor Sneddon told Black that he had not yet found a bacteriophage that would destroy the culture—that was why he was not ready to make it known to the world. In other words, it was too dangerous to be used without there being something to control it if it got out of hand. If we knew what the culture was there might yet be time for biologists to discover the destroying agent—the bacteriophage that Doctor Sneddon was still seeking...”

“Sir!” interrupted Lieutenant Green from the computer. “There’s a video call coming through from Doctor Grove now.”

Eagerly Colonel White strode back to his desk. On the video screen appeared the harassed clean-shaven face of a youngish intelligent-looking man.

“Well, Doctor?” the Colonel demanded brusquely. “Have you found any notes?”

“No, sir. But I have found something which may be of vital significance. Apparently the doctor was not killed outright. Before he died he scratched letters on the floor. They read X—XO—RCKHO.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes, Colonel. Your Lieutenant Emerald has photographed the floor and is transmitting the negative to Cloudbase. Scientific inspection might reveal other scratches.”

“Do those letters convey anything to you, Doctor?”

“Very little. As you know, Sneddon was very secretive about his more advanced researches. I assume the X-XO means literally to cross out—that

is to destroy—XO, but I don't know what the other letters mean.”

“Could it be a formula—or the start of one?”

“None that I know, Colonel. Of course it could be a code—one that the doctor did not share with me.”

“And of course if it is a code, he will take the key to the grave with him.” Colonel White was bitter. “Very well, Doctor. Thank you. We will do what we can. Meanwhile you must carry on searching for any clues that may help us to avert this Mysteron threat.”

“Of course, Colonel White!”

When the young biologist had gone from the screen, the Spectrum chief looked grimly at his colleagues.

“With the last of his dying strength, Doctor Sneddon apparently tried to convey some vital information. Whether our backroom boffins can make anything out of those letters I don't know. But they have less than forty-eight hours to come up with an answer. Meanwhile we must be prepared for the Mysterons to strike anywhere in the world. As from now all personnel will be on constant standby. This is a red alert, Lieutenant.”

“S.I.G., sir.” Green began to stab buttons on the computer. Red lights flashed. Distant electronic signals bleeped and buzzed.

Colonel White addressed the two captains and the two girls who sat before him. “That is all for now. Further orders will be relayed shortly.”

As she rose and left the control room with the others, Melody's heart was beating fast. She was glad now that she had acted as she had back in Florida. But for that, Spectrum would have known nothing of what was behind the Mysteron threat. But if only she could have stopped Captain Black escaping with that culture!

In the Amber room, Destiny patted a yawn and tossed her book on to a table beside her armchair.

“I cannot concentrate,” she said. “I am—how you say?—all locked up.”

“Keyed up, honey,” laughed Symphony, who was sharing standby duty with her.

Harmony Angel was stationed in the cockpit of the lead plane on the flight deck, ready for instant take off. Melody, on Doctor Fawn’s advice, and Rhapsody were taking a spell in the Sleep Room.

“That is it, keyed up!” Destiny said with a smile. “I am all tight inside. Already twelve hours have passed—and yet nothing happens. Time is running away from us. The boffins they find nothing to help us. Soon perhaps it will be too late...”

Destiny broke off! The red alert signal flashed and buzzed.

“Immediate launch Angels One, Two and Three!” The crisp voice of Lieutenant Green hailed over the intercom. “You will be briefed by Colonel White when airborne.”

“At last!” Destiny said eagerly, pulling her transparent flying helmet over her silky ash-blond hair. Already, she knew, Harmony’s plane would be catapulting from the flight deck above.

The two girls made quickly for the elevator. As they approached, the crinkled amber door slid open to reveal two fighter aircraft seats supported by steel tubes. The Angels sat down facing the room. The chairs slid back to the centre of the elevator shaft, the door closed again, and the seats bore the girls swiftly up through trap doors and into hatches that opened below the cockpits of their jet aircraft on the launch deck.

The tubes retracted, the hatches closed, and the two jets catapulted away along the deck to scream into the rarefied air of the white-flecked stratosphere and complete a V formation with Harmony’s plane.

In the Control Room, Lieutenant Green reported. “Angels skyborne, sir. Awaiting orders.”

The Spectrum chief spoke into his microphone. “Colonel White to pack leader. Harmony Angel, proceed to area reference point E948N at maximum speed.”

In the cockpit of her plane, hurtling in a wide circle above Cloudbase, Harmony set a course east by south and stabbed a button which gave her a location reading.

“That is Kufra in the eastern Sahara region, sir,” she said into the auto-reaction microphone attached to her helmet.

“Yes, Harmony,” replied the Colonel’s voice in her earphones. “Captain Black has been sighted on the highway from Cairo to Kufra by a land based agent.”

“What is the significance of that, sir?”

“Kufra is the main control centre of the World Food Organisation’s Sahara Project. It cannot be a coincidence that Captain Black has been seen making for it so soon after stealing Culture XO. You will take all necessary steps to prevent him carrying out his objective. There are no Spectrum field operatives within striking distance. You can reach Kufra in fifteen minutes—so it is up to you. Your radio link is Channel 071. The code call is Desert Blooms.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

“Good luck!” Colonel White closed the channel. Harmony pressed a switch and spoke again into her microphone. “Pack leader to Angels Destiny and Symphony. You heard the orders?”

“Sure did,” drawled Symphony. “Gee, we’ve been saddled with a big responsibility.”

Destiny broke in. “It is about time we had something like this to do.”

And as the three planes streaked high above the Mediterranean, Destiny’s hazel eyes sparkled in eager anticipation.

In the Cloudbase Control Room, to which he had been summoned, Captain Scarlet frowned worriedly at his chief.

“You’ve sent the Angels into a dangerous situation, sir,” he protested. “Captain Black will stop at nothing...”

“I had no choice, Captain. Only their planes can reach Kufra in time. But don’t worry. The three of them are quite capable of handling Captain Black, given an even break.”

“I hope so, sir. But what do you think Captain Black is aiming to do?”

“I can make an intelligent guess, Captain.” Colonel White turned to Green. “Switch on the display, Lieutenant.”

On the big screen appeared a map of northern Africa.

“Half a century ago, Captain,” the Colonel went on, “that vast area would have been coloured mainly orange and yellow to indicate desert. Now you see the major part of it, apart from the mountain regions, is coloured green to indicate growing crops. A miracle has taken place. You know why?”

“Of course, sir. By tapping the huge subterranean lakes far below the Sahara the WFO scientists and technicians have been able to set up a vast irrigation system that has literally caused the desert to bloom.”

“Exactly, Captain. It is now one of the largest corn regions of the world—an area that produces more wheat and barley and maize, apart from fruit crops, than the whole of the North American continent. It produces two harvests a year. Millions of people in Africa and Southern Europe and the Near East are dependent upon it for their basic food supplies. What would happen if those crops were destroyed?”

“Millions might be doomed to starvation.”

“Just as the Mysterons threatened, Captain. And the simplest way to do it would be to contaminate the water that is pumped up from a thousand

shafts to feed the irrigation plants—to contaminate it with Culture XO.”

“But we don’t know yet what that culture is, sir.”

Colonel White regarded him grimly. “I can guess now. It must be a bacteria that will act like a virulent weed killer—that will destroy all plant life which feeds on the water into which it has been introduced.”

“By Jupiter! You could be right, sir.”

“I’m certain I’m right, Captain. And I’ve no doubt that this bacteria, once introduced to the water, will multiply with great rapidity. Within weeks, maybe days, the Sahara could be a waste of dead and dying vegetation.”

Scarlet’s mouth went dry at the thought. “And we haven’t yet found the bacteriophage that will destroy Culture XO, sir.”

“No, Captain. And it is unlikely that we will until we know just what it is. Even then we can’t be sure—remember that Doctor Sneddon himself hadn’t found it.”

“Maybe there isn’t one, sir.”

“Possibly not.” The Colonel smiled tightly. “Now you know why I sent the Angels. Speed is absolutely vital. But if it will ease your mind at all, Captain, you and Captain Blue will take off immediately for Kufra. If the Angels can delay Captain Black from accomplishing his design, you may be in time to help them.”

“I’m on my way, sir!”

Captain Scarlet ran from the room, and a few moments later a Spectrum Passenger Jet piloted by Captain Blue catapulted from the flight deck.

Grim-faced, Colonel White watched it vanish in a sea of billowing clouds, then he turned to Lieutenant Green.

“Get me the World President on the closed circuit, Lieutenant. Tell him I want all pumping operations at the Sahara project to cease as from now.”

The three Angel planes screamed above the eastern end of the Atlas mountains, then hurtled low over the Libyan coast. In orderly green fields below, patterned by silvery ribbons of irrigation trenches, white-clad workers looked up curiously and watched the planes out of sight, little dreaming that they were bent on what might be, for millions of their fellows, a life or death mission.



The Angels overflowed the white highway linking Kufra with Cairo. They saw an occasional multi-wheeled truck hurtling towards Cairo and tractors moving between cultivated sections, but no vehicle that answered the description of the one that Captain Black had been reported driving.

Presently Kufra came into view above the horizon, the outlines of its white buildings and graceful palms diffused by the intense heat of the high sun.

Kufra had once been a large oasis on a caravan route. Now it was

inhabited only by the few technicians who were necessary to maintain the atomic station which controlled the vast networks of pumps and water pipelines irrigating countless millions of square miles of once arid sand and rocks and ghastly canyons. That sand was now growing corn and vegetables. The canyons were now lush valleys filled with olive groves and citrus orchards and apricot gardens.

For miles before the Angels reached it, they saw nothing moving on that white ribbon of road. They overflowed the oasis, circled it. Two white and red helijets with WFO markings stood on the palm-flanked airstrip, a truck outside one of the white buildings. They saw no sign of life.

In perfect formation they touched down on the airstrip and cut their engines. A strange, almost sinister silence enveloped them.

Harmony spoke into her microphone. "Open channel 071 please. Operation Desert Blooms."

"Come in, Harmony Angel," replied Colonel White. "Where are you?"

"We have just landed at Kufra."

"Any sign of Captain Black?"

"No, sir. If he was still on the road, we didn't see him. I feel he must be here. It is strangely quiet. The power plant does not seem to be operating."

"Orders were given for all pumping operations to cease—that is probably the reason. But if Captain Black is there, he must have heard you land."

"Unless he is already underground, sir."

"Yes. Go to it, Harmony. You must delay him somehow. Captains Scarlet and Blue are on their way."

"S.I.G., sir."

The Angels alighted. The sun blazed down from a cloudless sky, striking waves of shimmering heat from the white runway. There was not

even a sigh of a breeze to stir the fronds of the date palms flanking the airstrip. And over all hung that strange oppressive silence.

“Captain Black is here,” Harmony said quietly. “I feel it. Come.”

Harmony moved swiftly but warily towards the massive white buildings visible beyond the line of palms. Destiny’s face tightened as she followed, and she dropped her hand to the gun at her hip. The touch of it was comforting. She had a great respect for Harmony’s hunches.

They passed through the palms and went up an avenue of olive trees, festooned with white blossom, to the main control building, a tall oval structure surmounted by a dome. There was no sound but the faint scrape of their feet on the path.

“If Captain Black’s in there, we’re sitting ducks,” whispered Symphony.

But nothing happened! They mounted the short flight of steps to the high portico. The glass doors stood open and from them a refreshing wave of cool air washed over the girls.

They entered an empty lobby. At the far end, an open door revealed a chamber complemented with banks of electronic equipment. And here again was that strange oppressive stillness.

Destiny moved past Harmony to the open door. There was no one in the chamber beyond, but as the Angel hesitated a door opened and two men in technicians’ white overalls with WFO badges entered.

“So there is someone around after all,” Symphony muttered.

Ignoring the three Angels the men walked to the main instrument bank. One set a dial, the other slowly pulled back a lever. Lights began to flicker, a low hum sounded. From somewhere in the distance came the highpitched whine of a powerful motor starting up.

“They’re starting the pumps,” Harmony said. “But Colonel White said instructions were given for all pumping operations to cease.”

“Ma foi!” exclaimed Destiny. “Then we must stop them again!”

She darted forward and caught the arm of the man who had pulled back the lever.

She froze as the man turned, and her pulses began to race wildly. His face was strangely, ghastly pale for an Arab, as his hawkish features proclaimed him to be, and his dark eyes gleamed with a cold hatred.

“Do not interfere, Earth girl,” he said in an icy voice.

“Mon dieu!” she gasped. “He’s been Mysteronised!”

He grabbed her. He was powerful, a head and shoulders taller, twice her weight. But, like all the Angels, she was an expert in unarmed combat. A twist, a jerk—and he was flying over her shoulder to land with a crash at the feet of Harmony and Symphony as they hurried to her aid. His head hit the floor with a dull crack, and he lay still.

The other Mysteronised technician lunged at Destiny, but she sidestepped and chopped a merciless karate blow to the side of his neck. He crumpled without a sound.

The three Angels grimly studied the unconscious Mysterons.

“So Captain Black is here,” Harmony said softly.

“He killed them and when they were Mysteronised he ordered them to restart the pumps.”

Destiny drew her gun. “Stop the motors, Symphony! Come with me, Harmony!”

While Symphony thrust her weight on the lever, pushing it back to its original position, Destiny approached the doorway through which the two men had come, Harmony at her heels. Beyond was a circular chamber with other electronic equipment. From the centre of the floor a massive metal shaft rose to the plexiglass dome that gave light to the room.

Sprawled on the floor were three more figures in white WFO overalls. As Destiny and Harmony went towards them the whine of the motors died away and into the stillness that followed crept a faint moan.

They examined the men, all Arabs. Two were dead—shot through the head. It was the third one who had moaned. He was lying close to the central shaft.

Kneeling down beside him, Harmony lifted his head, cradling it gently on her arm. On the breast of his overalls was the monogram SC, denoting that he was the station controller. He opened his eyes and looked dazedly at them. Then recognition dawned in his dark eyes.

“Spectrum? But I—I do not understand. This man who came, he—he also wore Spectrum uniform.”

“But it was black, wasn’t it?” Harmony asked.

He nodded weakly. “Yes, yes!”

“He was a Mysteron agent. What happened?”

“I—I came up in the elevator. I found he had shot my assistants. He—he shot me—in cold blood.”

“Where is he now?”

The man pointed a wavering finger at the central shaft. “He—he went down in the elevator to the—the—”

His voice trailed away and he went limp.

“He’s dead,” Harmony said huskily, a catch in her voice.

“Well at least he wasn’t Mysteronised, poor devil,” murmured Symphony who had joined them. “He can rest in peace instead of being condemned to be a soulless slave to the Mysterons.”

Gun in hand, Destiny turned to the elevator shaft. “Let us go!” she said determinedly. “We must find Captain Black before it is too late.”

“Wait,” said Harmony. “First we must report to base. Down there radio communication may be difficult if not impossible.”

She contacted Cloudbase and reported to Colonel White what had happened and what they proposed to do.

“S.I.G., Harmony Angel,” he said. “You have no choice if Captain Black is to be stopped. Already it may be too late—but we must know. I’ll brief Captain Scarlet.” His voice softened perceptibly. “Good luck, girls! Take care.”

Destiny already had the elevator gate open.

They entered. Destiny pressed the button, and swiftly and silently the cage plunged down into the bowels of the earth.

CHAPTER 4

Destiny Takes the Plunge

SYMPHONY FROWNED. “It sure goes down a long way.”

“Look!” Harmony stammered, indicating a depth gauge on the wall of the cage.

“*Sacre bleu!*” Destiny gasped. “Nine hundred and fifty yards—and we still descend!”

Harmony thought for a second. “I remember reading that some of the lakes from which the water is pumped are over a mile below the desert—and the biggest is about a thousand miles long and two hundred wide,” she said in anticipation.

“That is not a lake—it is a sea, an ocean,” responded Destiny in exclamation.

Down, down they went. Breathlessly they watched the gauge... Twelve hundred yards... thirteen... fourteen... fifteen... fifteen thirty...

With a barely perceptible jolt, the elevator stopped. The gate slid back with a whisper of compressed air. They found themselves looking into a bare chamber whose curved walls were of heat-fused rock as smooth as glass, dully reflecting the soft strip lights in the roof.

For a long moment they stood in the elevator, guns held ready, listening. There was no sound.

Warily they moved out into the chamber. It was deserted—yet if Captain Black had come down on the elevator as the dying station controller had said, he must have come this way.

There was only one door leading from the chamber—a heavy metal flood-proof door like an air-lock hatch. As Destiny moved towards it, she checked. Against the wall was a control bank and above it was a large chart showing a series of underground lakes. Some were linked by channels, others were isolated.

“This must be a plan of the whole set-up,” Symphony said over her shoulder. “According to that, there is a chain of lakes stretching right under the Sahara region from the Nile almost to the Atlantic!”

“*Mais oui*,” said Destiny. “But in which one is Captain Black planning to put Culture XO?”

“Guess we can eliminate most of them,” put in Symphony thoughtfully. “They are too far away. He must have come to Kufra for a mighty good reason.”

“I’ve got it!” whispered Harmony. “We don’t know how much of the culture Captain Black has, but he will want to use it where it will be most effective. I think it will be here!”

She tapped the largest of the lakes, as big as an inland sea. It was about five times as long as it was wide, and its eastern extremity stretched almost to the Kufra station.

“That is the vast lake I told you about. Most of the others could be put into it and it acts as a reservoir for many of them—see the connecting channels! If Captain Black put the culture in that, eventually it would contaminate most of the water in the system.”

“*Ma foi!*” exclaimed Destiny. “I think you are right. But wait! According to the scale it is nearly twenty miles to this lake from here.”

“So what?” Symphony asked. “There must be boats. How else can the maintenance guys get around?”

“We must hurry!”

There was a turn-cock wheel beside the heavy door. Destiny turned it and the door swung ponderously outwards.

She led the way through on to the gallery that ran round the wall of a huge brilliantly-lit chamber containing massive pumping machinery, now still and silent. At intervals along the gallery, metal stairs descended into the pit-like depths.

At the far end there was another heavy flood-proof door. Destiny turned the wheel beside it, and it swung outwards to reveal a lighted passage tunnelled through the solid rock.

They moved quickly along this. It sloped gently downwards, and the air, cool and clean smelling, had a hint of dampness in it.

Destiny estimated they had gone about half a mile when she saw ahead a bright glare of light. She went on more cautiously and presently saw that the light came from beyond the tunnel's end.

They emerged at last on to a wide shelf of water-worn limestone rock forming a natural gallery at the side of a vast cavern whose extremities were lost in the blackness beyond the range of the arc light which illuminated the gallery.

The gallery was bounded by a waist-high metal fence and from a gap in this a stairway led down. Destiny leaned over the fence. Some thirty feet below was the gleam of dark water and tethered to a man-made rock jetty were two white-painted launches bearing WFO markings.

Symphony joined her. "Kind of spooky..."

Destiny gripped her arm. "Listen!"

As if from an immense distance echoed the faint purr of an engine.

"Captain Black," said Symphony eagerly. "He must have a launch. Let's go!"

They scrambled down the stairway to the jetty, boarded one of the launches, and cast off. A current began to take them slowly towards the impenetrable darkness at the rear of the cavern. Destiny fumbled with the unfamiliar controls, and the engine burst into life. The boat was streamlined, shallow, as if designed to pass through confined spaces. There was a small searchlight in the bows. Destiny switched it on, and a beam of blue-white light stabbed through the blackness ahead, glinting on age-old stalactites which gleamed like the teeth of some voracious monster.

Presently the beam picked out the far side of the cavern and in it was the opening of a tunnel big enough to take the launch.

Destiny switched off the engine. The boat, tugged by the current, moved slowly towards the tunnel. As the echoes died away, the faint purr of another engine drifted from the opening. Destiny started the engine again and nosed the launch into the gaping mouth of the tunnel.

“He can’t be far ahead,” said Symphony. “But can we catch him in time?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, cherie.”

“But what if we don’t?”

“Then we can only pray,” Harmony said quietly, “that someone somewhere will find a bacteriophage that will destroy the culture. If not—then the Mysterons will have won.”

In the Control Room on Cloudbase, Colonel White stood in one of the wings looking out at the cloud-rippled sky.

“Nothing from the Angels?” he asked anxiously.

“No, sir,” replied Lieutenant Green. “But according to the WFO chart they must be almost a mile underground.”

Colonel White sighed. “I wish—” He turned abruptly back to his desk. “Get me Captain Scarlet!”

“Yes, sir.”

Seconds later, a red light flashed on the desk and Scarlet came through.

“Where are you, Captain?” the Colonel demanded.

“Approaching the Tripoli coast, sir, area reference point E963N. E.T.A. twenty minutes.”

“S.I.G. Lose no time when you reach Kufra. Keep in touch.

“Twenty minutes,” muttered Colonel White as he switched off. “It might as well be twenty hours if Captain Black...”

“Urgent video call from Professor Correlli, sir,” the Lieutenant said.

“Put him through.”

On the smaller monitor screen appeared the face of a distinguished looking bearded man, who fiddled nervously with his heavy horn-rimmed spectacles.

“You’ve news, Professor?” White asked eagerly. “You’ve found the bacteriophage that will destroy Culture XO?”

“Er—no, Colonel. I am sorry to disappoint you, but...”

“Then what?”

“Well, as you know, my colleagues and I were trying to break what we thought was a code in the apparently unfinished message scratched by Doctor Sneddon. We were getting nowhere when my young secretary came up with a most remarkable suggestion—so simple in fact that for a moment I was inclined to scoff at it...”

“Save the elaboration till later, Professor,” the Colonel cut in. “What did the young lady suggest?”

The professor blinked. “Simply that the letters RCKHO which we were trying to decipher were not part of a secret code formula at all, Colonel, but the first part of a name.”

“Whose name?”

“Doctor R. C. Kholchak, the eminent Russian bacteriologist.”

“What?”

“I know that Doctor Sneddon collaborated on certain World Government researches with Doctor Kholchak and...”

“You think Sneddon was trying to tell us to contact Kholchak? That he might know how to destroy Culture XO?”

“Yes, Colonel. It is a—er—long shot but...”

“No shot is too long to try, Professor. If the Angels fail to stop Captain Black using the culture, then the bacteriophage will be vital to save millions from possible disaster.”

“Even if they do stop him, Colonel, we shall still need it. The Mysterons will know the nature of the culture and may have ordered scientist agents on Earth to make further supplies, so that if they fail in one place they can strike in another.”

“You’re right, Professor. The threat remains until we have the bacteriophage to destroy the culture. We must contact Doctor Kholchak immediately. Do you know where he is?”

“The last I heard of him he was in upper Amazonia doing field research. The Moscow Biological Control Centre should be able to tell you where to find him.”

“Thanks, Professor. Meanwhile, of course, you will carry on with your own research—in case Kholchak cannot help us?”

“Naturally. I hope we can come up with the answer before he does.”

The professor vanished from the screen and the Spectrum chief told Lieutenant Green to put through a priority call to Moscow. A few minutes later the answer to their inquiry came through on the teletype.

“They say that Doctor Kholchak’s last known point of contact was Iquitos in Ecuador,” said the Lieutenant.

“Last known? You mean he’s not in constant touch?”

“Apparently not. He doesn’t use the radio in the field. Reception’s bad in that country anyway, they say. He only contacts Moscow Centre when he returns to his laboratory at Iquitos.”

“Why do these guys have to make things more difficult for us? Someone at Iquitos must know where to locate him. Who’s our nearest field operative?”

Lieutenant Green consulted the chart.

“Lieutenant Viridian, sir—at Lima, Peru.”

“How far’s that from Iquitos?”

“Over five hundred miles by road. In an SPV he could make it in three hours.”

“Not in that sort of country, Lieutenant. He’d have to climb over the Andes.”

“In an S.P.I. it would take...”

“There’s a simpler answer, Lieutenant—Rhapsody Angel!”

Sitting in the cockpit of her strike craft on the launch deck, Rhapsody, the amber haired English girl, was thinking wistfully about Destiny and the others. If only she had been on standby duty when the alert was given! She would have been at Kufra now, pitting herself against Captain Black, instead of sitting here above the clouds biting her lip and wondering what was happening to her friends. This was the worst part of the Spectrum set-up—the waiting...

The epaulettes of her gold-trimmed cream uniform flashed green.

“Control Room to Rhapsody Angel,” said the voice of Lieutenant Green in her earphones. “Stand by for instant launch. Course SW41. Colonel White will brief you when airborne.”

Rhapsody’s heart leapt. Action at last!

She fastened her seat straps, and touched the button that fired the powerful atomic motors. The plane catapulted into the blue and, sweeping in a wide arc, began to scream south by west towards the distant coastline of the Americas.

Rhapsody's epaulettes flashed white, and the Colonel's voice came over the headphones.

"Proceed to Iquitos, Ecuador. Map reference point OS66W. Find Doctor Kholchak of the Russian Bacteriological Control and relay the message now being recorded on your teleprinter in both Russian and English."

"S.I.G., sir!" she replied eagerly.

"Good luck, Rhapsody!"

In the Control Room Colonel White watched the streaking plane until it was a mere speck against the cloud-flecked blue waste of the sky. Then he turned to his assistant.

"Alert Lieutenant Viridian. Tell him to proceed at all speed to Iquitos. Rhapsody may need him."

"S.I.G., sir!"

Lieutenant Green transmitted the message, then turned anxiously to his chief. "You think Rhapsody may hit trouble, sir? That the Mysterons will try to stop her perhaps?"

"It's possible, Lieutenant. It's on the cards that they knew of Doctor Kholchak even before we did. They lay their plans with superhuman cunning. It may be part of this present sinister campaign against the Earth to let us get so near to combating Culture XO—and yet so far. We can take no chances."

He sighed as he sat down at his desk, his rugged face set in a worried frown.

"Something wrong, sir?" asked Green anxiously.

The Spectrum chief smiled wearily. "I was just thinking, Lieutenant. We've got four Angels away. If anything should happen to them..."

He did not complete his thought aloud. He didn't have to. Green knew how his chief felt about the five "wonder" girls he had trained to be a vital part of Spectrum. Deep down he knew his chief regarded them as akin to the daughters he had wanted, but never had before his wife died.

The young Lieutenant's own thoughts also went to those three girls far below the Sahara...

Destiny peered ahead down the rock tunnel through which the beam of the searchlight on the launch's bows was boring a narrow blue-white cone.

Her watch told her they had been following the tunnel for over ten minutes. It was a natural tunnel, although here and there were signs of the rock walls having been blasted or fused to make the tunnel wider and safer.

There was no sound save the soft throbbing of the launch's motor and the rippling of water along its sides.

Now and then they passed through caverns where the dark cold waters became small lakes, but always another tunnel led on into the blackness of the underworld. And always, when from time to time she cut the motor to listen, Destiny heard the purr of the other launch ahead of them.

"Reckon Captain Black knows we're trailing him?" Symphony whispered at her shoulder.

"It's possible," Destiny replied softly. "To trail any Mysteron agent without his knowing is difficult. They have such strange powers of perception."

"And Captain Black is not just any agent," Harmony put in. "Besides, he has only to stop his engine and listen as we do—and surely he must hear us."

"*Ma foi!* That is true enough."

They fell silent while the launch moved slowly on.

Yes, thought Destiny, it was too much to hope that their enemy did not know they were in pursuit. What did he intend to do? Of only one thing she could feel certain—that he would not let them deter him from his sinister purpose.

The tunnel began to widen gradually until it was like the mouth of a huge funnel. The walls receded, the air became colder, the blackness ahead more impenetrable.

Then beyond the narrow cone of light the walls vanished completely and the echoes of the engine beat, thrown back by the walls, became fainter.

Destiny swung the searchlight in a wide-ranging arc. And only to the right did the beam splash on a rock wall, fifty yards off now. In every other direction the dark water stretched smooth and sombre, into the unknown.

“We’re on a lake—a big one,” she whispered.

She cut the engine. As the last murmuring echo faded, she listened. Like a mysterious droning voice from a far-off world drifted the faint sound of Captain Black’s motor. But it wasn’t easy to tell from which direction it came.

She switched out the searchlight and felt a hand tighten on her arm.

“What—what have you put the light out for?” Symphony’s voice asked hoarsely.

There was a nervous edge to it and Destiny smiled tightly. She did not feel so good herself. This darkness was like a cold blanket pressing about her, stifling her. Her scalp crawled with a prickly sensation, and she was glad she was not alone.

“Wait!” she whispered. Then, “Look! Off there to the right! Can you see it?”

“Ye—es. It looks like a light—a—a spooky light.”

Harmony laughed softly in the darkness behind them. “Whatever we find down here it will not be spooks, Symphony. That must be the searchlight on Captain Black’s launch.”

“*Mais oui!*” Destiny laughed, glad to relieve her own tension. “You see—if we kill our light we can keep Captain Black in sight without him seeing us. You do not mind, Symphony?”

“Guess I can grin and bear it,” the American girl chuckled. “Reckon you two think I’m a bit of a goose, letting the dark scare me.”

“Of course not,” Harmony said, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. “This is not ordinary darkness. All of us have our own little fears and phobias—we would not be human if we didn’t.”

“*Parbleu!*” muttered Destiny. “I am scared of spiders.”

“And I of wasps,” Harmony said. “Strange isn’t it? And yet we hurl ourselves through the skies at thousands of miles an hour, and face dangers that would cause most girls to faint from shock. But come, we must try to overtake Captain Black.”

Destiny restarted the engine and the launch moved on through the Stygian darkness in pursuit of that tiny glow of light now far down the enormous cavern.

Gradually the light ahead became brighter, bigger. Mile after mile slid back, gurgling beneath the keel of the boat.

Destiny wondered where Captains Scarlet and Blue were now. They must have touched down at Kufra by now. Colonel White would have told them about the elevator and when they reached the jetty they would find that other launch, and make their way through the tunnel. But when they reached this lake how would they know which way to go?

Then she remembered that down here they would be able to communicate by means of their person-to-person radio circuits. So

somehow she and her fellow Angels had got to stop Captain Black getting through to the great lake, to hold him until the Spectrum Captains reached them.

She pressed the throttle in a little more and the launch surged forward. Presently, against their quarry's searchlight glow, they could make out the silhouette of his launch.

"We'll soon be within pistol range," Symphony said. "We could try holing his boat below the water line and sinking it."

"*Ma foi!* That is an idea! But we will also be within range of his gun. But we are three to one..."

"No!" Harmony said decisively.

"Why not?"

"Because Captain Black has the culture with him. If he goes into the water and it should leak from its container—or if he loses it..."

"*Sacre bleu!* I was forgetting. He might even release the culture deliberately. And, once this lake is contaminated, who knows where it will spread? But we must stop him getting through to the great lake. It cannot be more than ten kilometres away now..."

She broke off abruptly.

"What's the matter, Destiny?" asked Symphony. The French girl pointed ahead. "Look! The end of the lake!"

In the haze of Captain Black's searchlight they could now see that the walls of the huge cavern, hitherto lost in impenetrable darkness, were closing in to join. A narrow strip of white beach appeared.

As they drew nearer, they saw that at the extremity of the lake there was a water channel leading up to the solid rock between metal walls which formed a big trough. It was long enough and wide enough to take two

launches side by side. The light gleamed on metal rods running upwards into the darkness from the wall of the trough.

“What is it?” Symphony asked. “There’s no way out! But why is Captain Black making straight for it?”

Harmony gasped. “I remember now!” she said. “On that chart in the Control Room, at the bottom of the elevator—a higher level was marked here. That must be a hydraulic lock—to elevate launches to a higher level leading to the great lake.”

“Jumping jets!” Symphony exclaimed. “If Captain Black gets into that lock and starts to rise, nothing we can do will stop him...”

“*Mon dieu!* And once he is at the top maybe he can jam the machinery and stop us following! We must do something.”

Destiny got out of the pilot’s seat.

“Take over the controls, Symphony. You and Harmony engage Captain Black—distract his attention. Damage his controls if you can—do anything but sink him.”

“Okay,” said Symphony, sliding into the seat and taking the wheel. “But what are you going to do, honey?”

Destiny removed her helmet and flashed her a reckless smile.

“I am going to try to get to the lock before Captain Black and hold the fort!”

She kicked off her boots and plunged over the side into the cold dark water.

CHAPTER 5

Destiny Makes a Mess of Things

AS THE ICY WATER closed over Destiny's head, she kicked herself well clear of the wake of the launch and began to swim under-water towards the end of the lake. When she was forced to surface, gunflame was lacing the darkness and awakening a thousand echoes from the rock walls.

Treading water, she saw that the Angels' launch was bearing down at speed on Captain Black's. Harmony, bracing her gun arm on the side of the launch, was firing rapidly.

"Ma foi!" Destiny gasped. "Harmony has forgotten her own warning. They are going to ram Captain Black. If they sink his boat..."

But suddenly Symphony swung the wheel sharply and the launch veered away at right angles, its wake sending a miniature wall of water sweeping towards the other boat, rocking it violently. Destiny saw the wave coming and dived, swimming as fast as she could towards the end of the lake, aiming to get between Captain Black's boat and the nearer curve of the cavern wall.

Forced again to surface, she saw that Captain Black had swung his boat round so that the searchlight on the bows was probing the darkness, seeking the Angels' boat. He was standing up, legs straddled, bracing himself against the rocking, his harsh face profiled in the glow of the searchlight, his gun levelled.

The sleek white shape of the Angels' launch appeared again, hurtling from the darkness.

He fired, but in that instant the other launch veered sharply away in a huge fountain of spray, leaping and bouncing and screaming like a wild creature, zigzagging so that the deadly missiles found no target.

“*Sacre bleu!*” Destiny gasped. “*C’est magnifique*—but it is crazy! That boat was not made to behave like a speed boat! Symphony will tear it apart.”

Captain Black ceased firing and raked the darkness with the searchlight, seeking the other boat.

Destiny swam on rapidly behind him.

What was in his mind? Strange that he should be provoked into retaliation like this. Surely he must have known they were following him?

But why try to understand a Mysteron-enslaved mind? Maybe he had intended to lay a trap for them, to destroy them in his own time? Maybe he had other plans for them—but by their mock attack on him the Angels had forced his hand, forced him to retaliate. Now he seemed bent only on their immediate destruction.

She heard him firing again. Symphony must be bringing the launch back for another suicide run, relying on her skill and speed to dodge those screaming missiles.

Destiny dared not look round. The white beach was less than twenty yards away now. She had to make it before Captain Black turned and spotted her. Something brushed her leg and a cold shiver went through her. It was almost as if something was nosing her, trying to scent whether—

Ma foi! There it was again! She gulped, swallowing water. Sudden panic lent her strength. Abandoning all attempts at caution now, she struck out blindly for that strip of beach.

She had never swum so fast, but it seemed an age before she felt the shelving ground beneath her groping feet. Panting, she stumbled out. Her

legs felt rubbery and suddenly there was no strength in them... she was down on her knees, sucking in the dank sweet air with great gasps.

Another burst of gunfire shocked her out of her panic.

She laughed nervously. It was crazy—letting her imagination run away with her like that! There could be no creatures down here, so far beneath the surface, so far from the life-giving sun. Speleologists who had penetrated to the deepest known caverns had found no life except a few blind white crustaceans—and those surely not as far down as this?

No, it must have been a piece of driftwood that had somehow fallen down a pothole—or maybe a chunk of pumice that had broken away from a strata of volcanic lava. That would float, wouldn't it?

She stood up and looked out on to the lake. Captain Black's launch was about twenty yards offshore, the searchlight still probing the darkness. Then into sight came the Angels' launch once more, hurtling and bumping and skidding over the dark water, with its engine screaming like a demented creature. Captain Black took deliberate aim, waiting for the launch to come within range.

Ma foi! This time he cannot miss, she thought.

She grabbed up a small rock from the beach and flung it at him with all her force.

Her aim was true. It hit him on the back of the head knocking off his cap. His gun dropped from his hand into the water and he slumped into the bottom of the boat.

At that moment a shot came from the speeding launch and with a splintering crash Captain Black's searchlight went out, plunging the cavern into total blackness. Destiny heard the Angels' launch screaming away again. She took her torch from her tunic pocket and switched it on. The

violent wash from the Angels' launch was driving the enemy craft towards the beach.

As it grounded she scrambled down to it, eager to make sure of capturing the deadly Mysteron agent before he could recover consciousness.

He lay crumpled in the bottom of the boat where he had fallen. There would be a mooring rope in the cabin locker, she thought. She climbed into the boat. It rocked slightly as she did so, throwing her off balance. She fell across the limp black-clad figure and then suddenly it came to life.

An iron-fingered hand shot out and gripped her throat as if in a vice, another wrestled the torch from her hand. Her senses began to swim. Through a darkening mist she saw the grim face of Captain Black smiling coldly down at her, hate gleaming in his dark eyes.

"You were not clever enough, Earth girl," he said.

Then silence!

It was deathly still in the vast cavern. Even the lapping of the water had died away. Drifting with silent engine through the darkness, a hundred yards from shore, Harmony and Symphony listened intently. They heard nothing.

"Strange," Symphony whispered. "You reckon one of those shots could have hit Captain Black?"

"I aimed at the searchlight to give Destiny a chance to get ashore," Harmony muttered. "But the launch was bucking so much one of the missiles might have gone wide. But what's happened to Destiny? Why doesn't she contact us—flash her torch or something?"

Symphony's throat tightened. "Gee, honey, you don't think...?"

"I'm trying not to think."

They sat there for a long moment, listening. Still there was no sound, no glimmer of light.

“Shall I start the engine and move in to see what’s happened?”

“No! Don’t start the engine, I mean. But we’ll take the launch in, Symphony. There are paddles clamped below the gunwhale—for emergencies, I guess. We’ll have to use them.”

They groped for the paddles, lowered them gently into the water and then began to paddle slowly towards the unseen beach. Tiny ripples of phosphorescence appeared about the dipping paddles.

“That’s caused by living creatures, isn’t it?” whispered Symphony. “So there must be some sort of life down... Oh!”

“What’s the matter?” Harmony demanded hoarsely. “I—I don’t know. But it was just as if—if something brushed against my paddle, something big and heavy. Gee, honey, you—you don’t think there could be—well—creatures in this lake?”

“This far down? The Japanese girl laughed softly. “Don’t be silly. What could...”

She broke off, her scalp crawling. What was that? Something had touched her paddle too!

“Honey! You okay?” came Symphony’s fierce whisper.

“Yes.” Harmony forced her low voice to sound calm. “We’d better quit talking. We must be getting near the beach. See the phosphorescence about the hull of the other launch?”

“Shall I switch on the searchlight?”

“No, we’d be a sitting target.”

Slowly they crept nearer. The faint swish of the paddles sounded startlingly loud, Harmony thought.

But if Captain Black was there he would have betrayed the fact by now.

She uttered an involuntary gasp as a torch blazed out, dazzling her. The harsh voice of Captain Black echoed through the silence.

“Keeping paddling, Earth girls—or the one you call Destiny will die.”

As Harmony’s eyes adjusted themselves to the glare of the torch, she made out the gaunt figure of Captain Black standing on the beach. He was holding the torch with one hand, a Spectrum gun in the other. And lying at his feet was the crumpled form of Destiny.

Harmony’s mouth went dry. Was Destiny already dead? Was Captain Black bluffing?

But then she remembered that the Mysterons never bluffed. They merely coldly calculated and carried out their purpose. If they were baulked by Spectrum, they would try something else.

And Mysterons never lied! If Captain Black threatened Destiny’s life if they disobeyed him, then she was still alive. To resist in any way, to trick Captain Black, would condemn Destiny to death.

So when he ordered them to throw their pistols into the water, they obeyed; and, when they beached the launch, they stepped ashore with their hands raised to await his will, desperately hoping for a chance to turn the tables. For Spectrum had learned that even the Mysterons made mistakes.

“I need your boat,” he said tonelessly. “One of your shots damaged mine below the waterline. But first I must make sure of you, Earth girls.”

He ordered Harmony to take a rope from their launch and bind Symphony and the unconscious Destiny together. Then he bound Harmony to the others and left them lying on the edge of the dark waters, their feet bathed in the wet coldness.

Climbing into the launch, Black pushed off and switched on the searchlight.

“I go now to accomplish what I was sent to do,” he said with a bleak smile. “The great lake will be contaminated by the Culture XO. Anything that feeds on its waters will die. The Sahara will become desert again. And as the voice of the Mysterons warned you —millions will be doomed to starvation, for there are not enough reserves of food on your Earth to feed them.”

He started the engine, then turned once more to them.

“As for yourselves, you will die here in the darkness of the netherworld. The surface of this lake rises three feet every twelve hours. It is rising now. In an hour it will reach its highest point—but you will not be alive to see it, for the high water mark is above your heads. Farewell, Earth girls!”

As he sent the launch purring towards the entrance to the lock, the wash caused the icy water to lap hungrily about the feet of the helpless Angels.

As the launch entered the bay of the lock, the engine stopped. There was a sighing of hydraulic machinery and slowly a slab of metal rose to seal the lake end of the bay. Then the bay rose on its gleaming metal shafts, carrying the launch up into the darkness.

Presently, as they lay there in the intense blackness at the edge of the lake, Harmony and Symphony heard the lock bay descend again. The sigh of the hydraulic machinery faded, and the cold stillness closed about them.

Harmony tried to free herself.

“We’ve got to get away from this beach before the lake rises,” she said.

“I’ve had a go already,” Symphony said bitterly. “But it’s no use.”

“I tried to slacken the ropes,” Harmony said, “but he was prepared for that and double-checked the knots and tightened them.”

“What else did you expect, honey?” Symphony said with a flat laugh. “He learnt his job with Spectrum, remember—before the Mysterons got him!”

But in spite of the apparent hopelessness of it, they went on trying.
Presently Destiny stirred.

“*Mon dieu!*” she moaned “What has happened to me?”

“Take it easy, honey,” Symphony said. “You’re okay—well at least you’re no worse off than we are. We’re all in the same boat.”

They told Destiny what had happened.

“It is all my fault. I really made a mess of things!” Bitterly she described how Captain Black had tricked her into believing he was unconscious.

“Forget it, honey,” Symphony said. “He fooled us too. Let’s have another go at these bonds. Now you can help maybe we can get some place.”

They wriggled and twisted for a while, but being tied together made things worse rather than better, and the darkness didn’t help. It seemed to Harmony that the ropes about her were tightening.

But Symphony seemed to have had better luck. “I’ve got one hand in active service, from the wrist downwards, anyway. Guess with a bit more effort I’ll be able to reach my thigh pocket.”

“If you could get your torch—that would be something,” Harmony said.

“That would be more than something,” Destiny gasped. “It is this darkness that is the worst—and knowing that the water is creeping up inch by inch...”

“Snap out of it!” Symphony cried “I’m the one that’s supposed to be scared of the dark. You two keep still while I do the wriggling—that might help.”

It did help, and presently Symphony was able to unzip her thigh pocket and get her finger tips to the end of the torch. A little more effort and she

was able to grasp it between them. Gingerly she withdrew it, working her hand from the wrist only, until she could grasp it properly.

“Phew!” she gasped. “I feel as if I’ve got writer’s cramp...”

“Shush!” whispered Destiny. “Listen! Can you hear something?”

They listened, holding their breath. Harmony could hear nothing but the thudding of her heart.

“What was it, Destiny?” she whispered.

“It sounded like—like something splashing out there in the lake—*Ma foi!* There it is again!”

Harmony heard it this time. Her skin crawled. Suddenly she remembered how her paddle had touched something, out there in the launch...

“When I was swimming,” Destiny went on in a whisper, “I thought something touched me—twice. *Tiens!* I lost my nerve. Maybe that’s why Captain Black was able to trap me so easily. I thought I was being foolish, but...”

“You were not being foolish, honey,” Symphony said tersely. “There is something out there. Look, there’s a big patch of phosphorescence! Where’s that confounded torch switch?”

Symphony’s groping fingers found the button and pressed it. A ray of white light stabbed out into the darkness. Awkwardly she manoeuvred it in her cramped hand and played it on the surface of the lake.

Then icy fingers seemed to probe the base of her skull. Her throat tightened.

Rising from the black surface of the lake about thirty yards out was a gigantic flat turtle head on a thick snake-like neck. In the light of the torch it was a sickly creamy grey colour, reminding Symphony of the underside of a slug.

The long neck rose higher and the head turned towards them. The great slit eyes, protected by horny ridges, seemed to gleam balefully.

“Mon dieu!” Destiny gasped. “What is it—a water serpent?”

“No—look!” Harmony said hoarsely, her mouth dry with apprehension. “It’s got a shell like a turtle below that neck.”

“It’s seen us,” Symphony said. “It’s staring straight at us. Maybe if I can keep the torch on its eyes, it won’t come nearer.”

Harmony tried to keep calm, to think logically. “I doubt if that will make any difference, Symphony,” she said levelly. “A creature living at these depths would most likely be blind. It would sense us by smell. Let’s see if we can work our way to the rear of the beach, right back against the rock wall. Maybe it won’t come ashore.”

But although she tried to say it bravely, she didn’t really believe that—and she knew the others didn’t. Slowly and awkwardly, bound together as they were, they wriggled and inched their way up the beach, while all the time Symphony tried to keep the torch focused on the nightmare creature in the water.

Once it dived out of sight, leaving great concentric circles of ripples to show where it had been, but before they could begin to hope that it had lost interest in them it appeared again, several yards closer to the shore.

At last they were back as far as they could go. They managed to prop themselves up against the cold slimy wall and sat there, watching the creature. It was swimming parallel with the shore now, its head turned towards them.

Harmony struggled again with the rope about her wrists.

“We’ve got to get free!” she cried desperately. “We can keep it at bay perhaps with rocks—till we find out how to work that lock and get up out of its reach. You two keep still while I try.”

But although she tried until her wrists were chafed and bleeding, she could make no impression on those cunningly tied knots. When she was exhausted, the others took over in turn, although Symphony's efforts were not very whole-hearted because of her fear of dropping the torch.

"At least the devil we can see is better than the one we can't see," she said with grim humour.

And all the time the huge creature was moving slowly, slowly closer. It seemed in no hurry—unless it was merely cautious.

Maybe, it isn't dangerous? thought Harmony, just inquisitive. But when the torch light gleamed on the rows of small sharp teeth that lined its cavernous red mouth, all her nightmare fears were now reality.

She found herself wondering what it fed on down here in the bowels of the earth. Were there fish—or were there other creatures like itself that were throw-backs or even survivors from a vanished age? She remembered reading that many thousands of years ago, maybe millions, the Sahara had been thickly vegetated, it had been clothed in jungle. Had this creature's ancestors roamed those jungle swamps?

She became aware that a voice was calling her. At first she thought she was imagining it—and then she realised it was coming from her earphones.

"Harmony Angel! Can you hear me, Harmony? This is Captain Scarlet. Can you hear me?"

With a half sob of relief, she gasped into her microphone.

"Harmony Angel to Captain Scarlet! Where are you?"

"On the jetty below the tunnel leading from the pumping chamber—where the WFO launch is moored. Where are you Harmony?"

"At the far end of the lake. All three of us are here—but believe me we are in deadly danger. Hurry—please!"

"We'll be right with you!"

Scarlet took the controls and Blue cast off the launch's mooring rope. Scarlet switched on the searchlight, then triggered the motor and sent the launch screaming over the dark water.

And at the other end of the lake, the saurian monster heaved more of its scaly shell from the depths and swam nearer and nearer the narrow strip of beach from which the torchlight blazed.

CHAPTER 6

Rhapsody Takes Over

HARMONY STARED at the monstrous reptile. It was perfectly still now, its unwinking eyes fixed on them—like a cat watching a mouse hole, she thought grimly. But she was sure now that those huge opaque saucers were unseeing, for they did not contract even when the white glare of the torch beam was full on them.

How long was it since she had spoken to Captain Scarlet? Two minutes? Three? It seemed an eternity—yet if he was driving the launch at full speed they should hear it soon.

“What’s it waiting for?” Symphony wondered aloud.

“Perhaps until the water covers us,” Destiny said. “Perhaps some instinct tells it that if it waits long enough we won’t be able to resist.”

“Maybe it reacts to sound,” Symphony suggested. “If it moves in, let’s all shout. That scares off some wild animals.”

“It is worth trying,” Harmony said quietly. “It can’t hear many noises down here and...”

She bit off her words. The creature had begun to move towards the shore with slow deliberation. Gradually, more of its huge grotesque lizard shape emerged from the water, and Harmony thought it must now be walking up the shelving floor of the lake. A nauseating musky odour touched her nostrils. “Now!” she gasped. “All together!”

They shouted and shouted. The raucous sound echoed off the curving wall into the vast darkness beyond the torches’ glow—and miraculously, it seemed, the hideous creature stopped. Its huge shape half out of the water, it

stood there, sightless eyes gleaming in the torchlight. It was so close now that Harmony could see its gill-like nostrils dilating as if it were sniffing them.

They were still shouting, their throats hoarse, when far off they saw a tiny spot of light dancing like a firefly in the blackness of the cavern. Rapidly it grew. They ceased shouting and heard the roar of the launch engine.

For long moments the creature remained frozen, directing that blind stare on them—almost, Harmony thought, as if it were calculating its chances of snatching them into the water before the launch reached them. Then it turned and ambled ponderously back into the water and slid beneath the surface, leaving only a widening circle of ripples to show where it had been.

“Mon dieu!” Destiny sighed. “I shall dream of that for weeks.”

A few moments later the launch’s searchlight swept over them and Captain Scarlet, cutting the engine, brought the boat skilfully round alongside the beach. Captain Blue leapt ashore and cut them free.

“Where’s Captain Black?” Scarlet demanded as they scrambled stiffly into the launch.

Harmony told him about the lock leading to the great lake.

“We’ll never catch him in time,” she said despairingly.

“We can try,” he said grimly. “He might have hit some trouble that’ll delay him. Let’s go!”

Triggering the engine into life again he steered it into the lock bay. Activated apparently by an invisible ray, the metal plate rose behind them, sealing the launch in the bay. With a hiss of compressed air the bay elevated.

They fretted with impatience every inch of the hundred foot rise. Then the bay stopped, a sluice gate opened in the seemingly solid rock and in the searchlight beam they saw a water channel boring away as straight as a gun barrel into the unknown, “Hold tight!” Scarlet said as the launch nosed into the tunnel.

With a nerve-shattering roar the launch leapt forward. Harmony, clinging to the rail of the overcrowded craft, clenched her teeth against the sound. Waves of dark foam-crested water churned away from the launch bows, climbing the curving walls and drenching them with spray. Harmony swallowed. If they hit a rock fall or a submerged snag at this speed—

But the long channel was clear. Less than ten minutes after leaving the lock the launch hurtled like a cork from a champagne bottle into the great lake, under a low overhang of white crystalline rock that almost scraped the cockpit cover behind which they crouched.

Scarlet cut the engine and the echoes died away.

As the boat drifted on under its own momentum, Scarlet swept the black waters with the searchlight. There was nothing.

“Switch it out,” Blue said. “Maybe we can spot his light.”

But, as the intense darkness snapped about them, they saw nothing but the faint greenish phosphorescence of microscopic creatures in the rippling water. And then, as from the immensity of space itself, echoing hollowly about them, came the voice of Captain Black.

“TOO LATE, SPECTRUM! CULTURE XO IS IN THE LAKE. ALREADY THE BACTERIA ARE MULTIPLYING A MILLIONFOLD. YOUR SAHARA PROJECT IS DOOMED. BEFORE MANY MONTHS HAVE PASSED MILLIONS WILL FACE STARVATION. THIS TIME THE MYSTERONS HAVE TRIUMPHED! FAREWELL, SPECTRUM!”

The ghostly voice died away and silence closed about them once more.



In the Control Room at Cloudbase, Colonel White listened grimly to Captain Scarlet's radioed report.

"I'm sorry sir," Scarlet added. "We did all that we could—and the Angels were magnificent. I shouldn't have liked to have experienced what they did down there in that lake. It was sheer bad luck that prevented them capturing Captain Black."

"I'm sure it was, Captain. No blame attached to them. Tell them so. All of you report back to base immediately."

"S.I.G., sir!"

When Captain Scarlet went off the air, the Colonel turned to Lieutenant Green.

"Now everything depends on Doctor Kholchak—if Rhapsody can find him. Where is she?"

"Approaching the mouth of the Amazon, sir. Estimated arrival time at Iquitos forty minutes."

“Good! Of course Kholchak may not be able to help. On my instructions WFO scientists are taking samples of the water in the great lake, but it may be some hours before they get a sample containing Culture XO.”

“And when they do, they will still have to find the bacteriophage that will destroy it, sir.”

“Exactly, Lieutenant—which even Doctor Sneddon had not discovered before he was murdered by Captain Black.”

“Meanwhile time is running out for us, I guess.”

“Not too fast, Lieutenant—that's some small consolation. There's enough water in the reserve tanks to keep the Sahara project going for a few days. After that, of course, most crops will be without water—and you know what that will cause in that latitude. The sun will be as lethal as Culture XO itself, something which the Mysterons obviously took into account.”

“Guess they backed their horse both ways,” the Lieutenant said bitterly.

“A typical example of Mysteron cunning,” said the Colonel. He smiled tightly. “But talking of horses, I've got a hunch that our best bet right now is Rhapsody Angel...”

For over two thousand miles now, Rhapsody had been flying over the Amazon, above a waterway which was but a wide chasm in a green hell which had changed little in the past century.

Occasionally a modern town was visible, its tall buildings pointing graceful white fingers to the sky. Here the jungle had been forced back from the banks of the mighty river. But such places were like drops of white milk in a vast dark green ocean. For the most part the jungle, savage and unconquerable, still easily held its own against the puny efforts of Man to invade it.

Far ahead, beyond the headwaters of the great river and its countless tributaries, towered the snow-capped peaks of the Andes.

Her epaulettes flashed white and the Colonel's voice boomed over the headphones.

"Cloudbase to Rhapsody Angel. Where are you?"

"Approaching Iquitos. E.T.A. seven minutes."

"Good. The airport authorities have been notified of your arrival. A runway is being kept clear. A captain of police will be placed at your disposal to afford any assistance you may need."

"Thank you, sir."

"That's all for now, Rhapsody. Keep in touch—and good luck. A tremendous lot depends on you now."

"I realise that, sir."

Iquitos appeared ahead through the green sea of jungle. It was a biggish town, squeezed between the main Amazon and one of its tributaries like a nut between nutcrackers.

She reduced speed, and flew low over the town. It had many tall modern buildings, but much of it was old and depressing. The small airport with graceful white control buildings stood close to the jungle beyond the town.

"Angel aircraft from control tower," a suave voice said over her radio. "Please land on runway seven."

"Thank you!" she replied.

She circled the airfield and brought the plane gently down on the clearly numbered runway, then taxied towards the control building where a motley crowd had gathered.

As she alighted, they swept forward, but two blue and white trucks charged between them and the plane and white-uniformed police officers

scrambled from the vehicles to form a cordon about the craft, linking arms to hold back the excited crowd.

“Quite a celebrity,” Rhapsody mused, looking at the eager curious faces.

They were of all shades from putty white to black. Most of the men were white-suited, but the women wore gay dresses. There were a few stolid-faced Indians in straw hats and dirty slacks. In the old days such receptions had been the privilege of film stars and pop singers. At first, Rhapsody, like all the Angels, had found this sort of thing disconcerting, but now she secretly enjoyed it a little.

But she realised the crowd’s interest was not prompted by stupid hero worship—most of the people were genuinely grateful for the fight Spectrum members were waging on behalf of mankind against the Mysterons.

A dapper young police captain with olive-skinned features approached her and saluted smartly.

“Welcome to Iquitos, señorita! I am Captain Juan Alvarez, deputy to the commandant of police. I have the honour of placing myself at your disposal.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she smiled. If she had to have a police escort, she wasn’t sorry that he was as handsome as Captain Alvarez. “Will you please see that my plane is well guarded while I am away. It has secret equipment that Spectrum would not like to fall into the wrong hands.”

“I understand, señorita.”

He gave an order to a sergeant and a squad of men with drawn guns disposed themselves about the plane.

The rest of the police forced a path through the jostling crowd, and Captain Alvarez, waving back children who clamoured eagerly for Rhapsody’s autograph, escorted her to a jeep. He handed her into it and took the driving seat beside her.

“Where to, señorita?” he asked with a flash of white teeth as he started the engine.

“The laboratory of Doctor Kholchak please.”

“Ah, yes.” He frowned. “Perhaps it is essential that you go there, señorita, but...”

“But what, Captain?”

Before he replied, he sent the jeep sweeping round the control building and out on to a broad white highway.

“When we learned the nature of your purpose in honouring Iquitos with your presence, señorita, I thought it might save your so valuable time...”

“That was thoughtful of you, Captain,” she smiled. “And what did you learn that would be helpful to me?”

To her consternation he took both hands off the wheel to spread them in an expressive Latin gesture. “Nothing, señorita. That is the point.”

The jeep swerved alarmingly, narrowly missing a car that sped in the opposite direction. He hurriedly grabbed the wheel again and got the jeep under control.

“Pardon, señorita!” He flashed her a boyish smile, and went on. “At the laboratory I saw señorita Nikita, the doctor’s assistant. She does not know where he is—she has had no communication with him for several days.”

“She is worried?”

“No, no! It is just usual with him. The good doctor is a brilliant man, but he is—well, a little eccentric, if you understand? He will not even take a radio. He does not like them. When he is working he does not like to be interrupted—not even by a radio call.”

“Well, plenty of busy men are like that, Captain.”

“*Si, si*—but you see it means that señorita Nikita will not be able to help you. She cannot tell you where to find the doctor.”

“But we’ll go there just the same, Captain—she may be able to give me some clue.”

He shrugged. “As you wish, señorita.” He smiled at her, ogling her roguishly. “Am I not yours to command?” She suspected he was enjoying this particular assignment.

Captain Alvarez swung the jeep into a side road that led to the Nanay river. Then it jolted along a track between the swampy bank of the river and partially-cleared jungle. Presently a white bungalow building which looked half-laboratory, half-dwelling quarters, came into view. It was built on concrete piles with a verandah overlooking the river, and a small jetty to which a big cabin launch was moored.

Captain Alvarez stopped the jeep at the steps leading up to a shady porch. Through a window a white-coated assistant was visible.

The Captain leapt agilely from the jeep to assist Rhapsody down with a gallant flourish.

“Do you wish me to accompany you inside, señorita?”

“No, thank you, Captain,” she smiled.

He bowed. “Very well. I will remain here.”

Rhapsody mounted the steps. The air was humid, sticky. The high sun burnished the sluggish brown river from which drifted the fetid smell of rotting vegetation. There was the thin whine of mosquitoes.

She had a strange uneasy feeling, as if she was being watched. It was not the first time she had experienced it when engaged in operations against the Mysterons.

She paused on the porch and looked back. Captain Alvarez was walking slowly along the track away from the jeep, lighting a cigarette. Beyond him brightly-coloured butterflies fluttered among the trees.

She shrugged off the feeling and knocked on the door.

It was opened immediately by a youngish dark haired woman in a laboratory overall. She was good-looking rather than pretty, with a sallow tinge to her complexion.

She smiled pleasantly. “You are the girl from Spectrum? I am Tanya Nikita. I heard you were coming. Spectrum have already been in radio contact with me—but I could tell them little, no more than I could tell Captain Alvarez. Please come in!”

Rhapsody took off her helmet and followed the biologist into the well-equipped laboratory. An air conditioning plant whirred softly. It was delightfully cool here after the humidity outside, and no longer was she aware of that fetid stench from the river.

There were three male assistants busy in the laboratory. All Latin Americans, she thought. They gave Rhapsody friendly smiles as she followed Miss Nikita into her private office.

The biologist waved her into a chair. “Would you like some tea—I know you English have never lost your love for it any more than we Russians.”

“No, thank you,” Rhapsody smiled. “I shan’t take up much of your time. All I want to know is if you have the slightest clue as to where I can find Doctor Kholchak.” She paused. “You know why I want to find him, of course?”

“Yes. Spectrum informed me.”

“Do you know anything of this Culture XO?”

“No. I have only been working with Doctor Kholchak for a few months. I was not with him when he collaborated with Doctor Sneddon.”

“He has never mentioned the culture to you?”

“No.”

“Do you realise how important it is for me to find him—and quickly?”

“Of course. It is a terrible thing the Mysterons have done. As a biologist I feel most deeply about it. But I’m afraid all I can tell you is that Doctor Kholchak may be anywhere within an area of several hundred square miles.”

Rhapsody whistled softly. “Rather like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Any chance of locating him by plane?”

“Impossible I would say,” said the biologist. “He is operating in what is still virtually virgin jungle.” She gestured through the window at the river. “All I can suggest is that you travel up the Nanay to the Indian village of Curaco. There is a trader there named Pedro Ruiz. Sometimes Doctor Kholchak stops there for a night and plays Señor Ruiz at chess. If anyone knows where he might be, it is Señor Ruiz.”

“How far is Curaco?”

“About fifty miles. You could make it in a launch in a few hours. If you wish you can borrow ours.” Rhapsody hesitated. She could try landing her aircraft at Curaco, but it would be risky if there was no proper landing place, and if she crashed—

She smiled at Tanya Nikita. “Thank you! I’ll take up that offer.”

“Good! I am glad to help. And now perhaps you can spare just a few moments for that cup of tea?”

Rhapsody thought of the humid air outside and nodded. “I think it would go down rather well, thank you...”

Outside, Captain Alvarez was still strolling down the track, drawing on his cigarette and gazing thoughtfully at the jungle.

She was beautiful, this Rhapsody Angel. *Caramba*, that was a good name for her! And he, Juan Alvarez, was a lucky man to be chosen to escort her. For one moment he had been afraid that the commandant was going to give himself that delightful task—

He froze. Something was moving through the undergrowth.

“Señor Capitaine!” a man’s voice called urgently. “Quick, come here!”

Captain Alvarez flung away his cigarette and pushed through the bushes, his hand on the gleaming butt of the pistol at his hip.

A man was standing there, with the matted straight black hair and shabby clothes of an Indian. Before him he deferentially clutched a shapeless straw hat.

But his stolid, ugly features were strangely pale, for an Indian, and his dark eyes burned with a cold light.

“What is the matter?” the Captain demanded. “Why do you call me?”

From inside the straw hat the Indian drew a gun. Captain Alvarez uttered a gasp and tried to draw his own. But before he could do so the Indian fired. The missile struck the Captain between the eyes. He was dead before he hit the ground.

For a long moment there was silence. Then down through the trees stabbed a strange green ray. It passed over the lifeless body of Captain Alvarez and vanished.

The man who had been Captain Alvarez lay still on the jungle carpet. By his side stood an identical body to that of the Captain—but the Mysteron kind. Retro-metabolism had taken place.

The newly created Mysteron Agent faced his counterpart, hatred burning in his glazed eyes.

The latter spoke tonelessly. “You know what you have to do?”

“I know. I will obey only the Mysterons.”

“Then go!”

The man who had been Captain Alvarez picked up his fallen cap, turned, and walked back to the jeep that waited outside the laboratory.

CHAPTER 7

Rhapsody Makes a Date With Death

RHAPSODY LEFT the laboratory. The man who had been Captain Alvarez was leaning nonchalantly against the side of the jeep, smoking another cigarette. He threw it away as she came down the steps towards him.

“There is no need for me to keep you from your duties any longer, Captain,” she smiled. “I’m going up river by launch.”

He bowed slightly. “In that case, señorita, I shall have the pleasure of accompanying you,”

“There is no need——”

“They were my orders, señorita—to provide a constant escort for you. At the request of Colonel White of Spectrum.”

His voice was firm, insistent, his handsome olive-green features set determinedly.

Evidently, she mused, there was a much tougher streak in the gallant Captain than she had thought. But then would he have been a police captain without it? She thought of the journey up river, into territory that was completely alien to her, through dangers that Tanya Nikita had only hinted at. Perhaps it might be useful to have company.

“Very well, Captain. We must leave immediately.”

He clicked his heels and saluted. “I am at your service, señorita.”

A few minutes later they were ready to leave. Tanya Nikita saw them off from the jetty.

“Goodbye, Rhapsody,” she said, shaking hands warmly. “I am glad the Captain is going with you. It is not good country for a girl to go alone in.”

She smiled. “Not even a Spectrum Angel. You have such a pretty head. That hair.”

Rhapsody laughed. “Does that make it more dangerous?”

“She means,” said the Captain, who was already in the launch, “that there are still Auca headhunters in the hidden depths of the jungle. Yours would be a beautiful head to shrink, señorita.”

He did not smile as he spoke and his dark eyes were fixed on her with a strange intensity.

For a moment her blood seemed to run cold. She had heard of the head shrinkers. Once she had seen a tsanta—a shrunken head—in the British Museum, with its shrivelled mahogany face and long black hair—looking like a hideous doll’s head. The attendant had described with almost ghoulish relish how the heads were shrunk and had told her that a missionary had once found a head with long amber hair like her own.

“And of course, señorita, there are the piranhas, the little fish that pick a man’s body clean to the skeleton within a few minutes.”

Rhapsody glanced at the white uniformed figure in the boat. He seemed deadly serious. What was he trying to do—scare her from this river trip? Or was he really scared himself—but too proud to admit it? Yet he had insisted on coming!

Tanya Nikita laughed. “Take no notice of Captain Alvarez. The piranhas are only dangerous if you fall into the water—and then only if you are bleeding. It is the scent of blood that drives them mad and makes them so voracious.” She grew serious again. “But in the jungle when you land there are very real dangers—the great snakes, and the jaguars and other big cats. And of course the Auca, although you may travel for days without seeing one. Doctor Kholchak is safe among them, for they trust him. But they trust few white men.”

Rhapsody smiled. “Don’t worry, Miss Nikita, I am used to danger.”

Captain Alvarez took the wheel and they pushed off, chugging slowly upstream. Tanya Nikita stood on the jetty, waving to Rhapsody until the spirals of mist rising from the mud banks hid her neat white figure.

For many miles they chugged up river, maintaining a steady ten knots.

At first they had frequently passed small Indian villages and white settlements squatting in clearings at the water’s edge. But now the green mass of the jungle had closed in completely, trailing snakelike vines into the brown water.

Alligators basked in the sun on the mud banks, strange birds with gorgeous rainbow plumage flashed into the sunlight to zoom back into the trees. Once Rhapsody saw a huge mottled snake with a repulsive triangular head slither from a tree trunk into the river—an anaconda, she thought.

It was oppressively hot, with that fetid smell of decay. Only the slight breeze caused by the boat’s passage made it bearable. Rhapsody glanced at her companion sitting behind the wheel. She thought that he was strangely quiet. Had she been right about him being scared? Yet so long as they kept to the river there seemed little danger. When they reached Curaco the captain could return to Iquitos if he wished and she would seek Doctor Kholchak alone. The trader, Pedro Ruiz, would no doubt provide her with Indian guides.

“I’m going into the cabin, Captain,” said Rhapsody at last. “Miss Nikita said there are refrigerated drinks. Do you want one?”

Without looking round he muttered something which she took to be a refusal. With a puzzled glance at him, she entered the cabin and opened the battery-powered refrigerator, and found a bottle of lemonade. She felt better when she had downed a glass.

Closing the door, she sat down at the small desk and spoke into the auto reaction microphone in her helmet.

“Channel 045. Rhapsody Angel to Colonel White.”

The Spectrum chief came through immediately. “Where are you, Rhapsody?”

She told him and reported briefly the result of her interview with Tanya Nikita.

“It’s a lead, anyway,” he said. “Whether it will get us anywhere remains to be seen. If only Kholchak wasn’t so bullheaded about radios! A lot depends on what sort of a fellow this trader Pedro Ruiz is. You may get a lucky break, Rhapsody. Let’s hope so!”

“Our eggheads haven’t come up with a bacteriophage to kill Culture XO then?”

“Would I be asking you to go through with this if they had?” he asked with a touch of asperity that told her how worried he was. “Report at hourly intervals, Rhapsody—unless you have urgent news!”

“S.I.G., sir.”

She poured herself another glass of lemonade and drank it. Sweat was trickling down her face. She found a fan, switched it on, and then took off her helmet.

There was a washbasin in the corner, with hot and cold taps. She bathed her face first in warm water, then in cold, and felt refreshed. Picking up a comb, she ran it through her long amber hair—

She froze, staring in the mirror. The reflection of the slender legs of a white-uniformed figure had appeared in the doorway. Her flesh crawled with a sense of impending danger. Swinging, she saw Captain Alvarez standing there, his gun pointed at her, his dark eyes cold and expressionless,

his lips thin. Was it just her fancy, or was his handsome face harder, paler than it had been?

Suddenly the horrible truth burst into her mind.

“You,” she gasped. “You’ve been Mysteronised! That’s why you’re different.”

“I am the slave of the Mysterons, Rhapsody Angel,” he said tonelessly. “You must not find Doctor Kholchak. You must die!”

Her throat tightened. It was all so clear now. The Mysterons had learned of her mission. Somehow one of their agents had killed the real Captain Alvarez and then his body had been Mysteronised—probably while she was in the laboratory talking to Tanya Nikita.

His hand tightened. He was about to press the trigger button. Between them was a stool. Desperately she lashed out at it with her foot.

Even as he fired, it hurtled at him and the bullet ploughed into the thickly padded seat. Then the stool struck the Mysteron’s hand and the gun flew from it.

She snatched at her own gun, but his reactions were lightning fast. His hand came up with a quick snapping movement of the wrist and a knife flashed at her head. Almost too late she saw it and tried to duck. The knife whistled through her hair and shattered the mirror behind her.

Before she could bring her gun up, he was on her like a white panther, chopping a vicious blow at her wrist with the edge of his hand. The gun dropped from her numbed fingers and then his hands were reaching for her throat, seeking it with steely fingers, his dark eyes filled with fanatical hatred.

Instinctively she thrust her unharmed hand forward, ramming the heel of the palm under the chin, snapping his head back.

As he reeled away off balance, she dodged past him, her eyes seeking the guns. She saw the Mysteron's weapon by the table, but before she could reach it he was flinging himself at her again!

Deliberately she fell on her back, brought up her feet, catching him in the stomach. With a gasp he hurtled over her and crashed through the doorway onto the deck.

She scrambled to her feet, snatched up the gun and ran out after him.

He was lying on his back on the deck, blood oozing from a cut on his forehead. His dark eyes darted merciless hate at her.

It would have been easy to have shot him. But, although she knew he was no longer human, that he was a creature as deadly as the anacondas and jaguars in the jungle about them, she could not bring herself to destroy him. She remembered the handsome gallant young police officer he had been such a short time ago.

"Get up!" she ordered tersely.

Slowly he began to rise, raising himself up first on his hands into the sitting position, his dark cold eyes fixed unswervingly on her. He drew up his legs, began to push himself up. Then, with the speed of a striking snake, one booted foot lashed out, kicking she gun from her hand. It skittered across the deck and under the rail into the river.

Like a steel spring uncoiling he launched himself at Rhapsody, smashing her back against the cabin doorway. Her bare head struck it hard, dazing her.

Then he seized her with a strength incredible for his slim frame, raising her above his head with both hands.

"Now you die, Earth girl!" he said tonelessly.

He walked to the rail and deliberately dropped her overboard.

She caught sight of a trailing rope, and frantically she clutched at it like a drowning man at a straw.

But it didn't check her fall. The rope snaked down after her. As she hit the water the horrific thought flashed into her mind. The piranha!

On the deck, the Mysteron who had been Captain Alvarez stood smiling down at her as she vanished beneath the water, indifferent to the rope that snaked past his foot. The end of the rope came whipping across the deck, a small weight attached to it. It wrapped itself like a bolas about his ankle and the next instant he was jerked off his feet.

With a strange non-human cry he hurtled through the rail and plunged into the swirling brown water.

Surfacing, gasping for breath, Rhapsody heard that desperate cry and saw the white-clad figure of the Mysteron vanish beneath the surface.

And then the river at that point boiled with a strange turbulence. A white-sleeved hand appeared, groping above the surface. She had a glimpse of a ghastly white face. Then it vanished and the brown water began to take on a red tinge.

"The piranha!" she gasped.

The blood from the cut on the Mysteron's forehead must have attracted them.

Her heart froze with horror. But she knew there was nothing she could do to save the Mysteron. She turned and struck out for the nearer shore, less than a hundred feet away. Terror spurred her on. Even the thought of alligators could not oust that greater fear.

With every desperate lunging stroke she expected to feel those tiny razor teeth slashing at her uniform.

Hours seemed to pass, hours of flailing, tiring limbs and labouring aching lungs. Yet it could only have been a few minutes later when she

found herself crawling among the tangled snake-like roots of the great red mangroves.

Sobbing with near exhaustion, she hauled herself on to firm ground and then the green world of the jungle seemed to swirl madly around her and she knew no more.

Out in the river the blood-tinged turbulence had ceased. A few shredded pieces of white uniform drifted slowly downstream in the muddy water.

The pilotless launch careered on upstream until it rammed the mud bank of an island and stuck fast.

In the Cloudbase control room, Colonel White glanced at the chronometer, then looked anxiously at Lieutenant Green.

“Rhapsody Angel should have been through with a routine check report by now.”

“Yes, sir—she’s fifteen minutes late.”

“Have you tried to contact her?”

“Three times. The channel seems to be open—but there’s no answer. It could mean she’s not wearing her helmet. It’s mighty hot out there...”

“She wouldn’t fail to make a routine check call unless she was prevented, Lieutenant. This could mean Mysteron trouble.” The Colonel’s craggy face puckered in a worried frown. “Get me Lieutenant Viridian.”

“S.I.G.”

Seconds later a yellowish green light flashed on the Colonel’s horseshoe desk, and a crisp voice crackled over the intercom.

“Lieutenant Viridian reporting from SPV 765, sir.”

“What’s your position, Lieutenant?”

“I am approaching Santa Cruzero on the western slopes of the Andes.”

The Colonel glanced at the illuminated display map which Lieutenant Green had switched on. “So you are over two hundred miles from Iquitos?”

“As the crow flies, sir. I shall have to make detours, of course, but I should reach Iquitos in two hours.”

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“Let’s hope that’s soon enough. We’ve lost contact with Rhapsody Angel. She was making for a village called Curaco, a hundred miles up the river Nanay.”

“That’s nearer to me than Iquitos, sir. It could cut my estimated arrival time by thirty minutes if the going’s reasonable.”

"Fine! Make for Curaco and backtrack to see if you can find what’s happened to Rhapsody.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

“If by chance Doctor Kholchak should be in Curaco or its near vicinity, you will take over Rhapsody’s mission in the event of her failing, or not having arrived there before you start searching for her. That is top priority.”

“I understand, sir.”

The Colonel closed the channel and relaxed with a faint sigh. “Now all we can do is wait, Lieutenant.”

“Must we, sir?”

He looked up to see that Harmony Angel had entered the Control Room.

“Something’s happened to Rhapsody, hasn’t it, sir?” she asked, her black almond eyes fixed on him anxiously.

“There’s no certainty of that, Harmony. She’s just failed to make her routine check call...”

“Something has happened. I feel it.”

His lips tightened. He respected these strange intuitions of the Japanese girl—hunches he’d call them—and this one merely underlined his own secret fear only too well.

“Let me fly out, sir. Maybe I can find her.”

"No, Harmony! Even in your jet craft you could scarcely get to Curaco sooner than Lieutenant Viridian's SPV, and you might find it impossible to land in that jungle country. And I can't risk having another Angel out of action."

"But, sir..."

"That's my decision, Harmony. If the Mysterons believe they have won this round they might strike again in some other way immediately. We cannot afford to squander our strength."

"I understand, sir."

He smiled. "Don't worry too much. Rhapsody's not indestructible like Captain Scarlet, but she's quite capable of taking care of herself. I've got a hunch she'll show up where she's least expected."

Rhapsody opened her eyes. She was still lying where she had collapsed among the mangroves. The same fetid stench was in her nostrils. Steam rose from her wet uniform. She rolled over and sat up and looked at the murky river, shuddering when she remembered what had happened.

She looked at her service watch. The immersion could not have affected it, she knew. Since she had made her report to Cloudbase over an hour had passed.

Through the trees upriver, she saw the gleam of a white beach. She clambered over the mangrove roots to it. A small stream of clear water joined the main river here. She cupped her hands and drank. It was slightly brackish, but cool and refreshing.

She went to the end of the spit of sand and gazed up and down the river, in the hope that she could spot some craft. But there was nothing—not even an Indian canoe. Steamers penetrated this far only at rare intervals.

"Guess there's only one thing for it," she muttered. "I'll have to walk. If I can find a track going upriver."

She found one almost immediately, leading away through a narrow dark tunnel of mahogany trees and closely entangled vines, some of them brilliant with vivid scarlet blooms.

Resolutely she set off along it. How far to Curaco? She had little idea, although she supposed it was over fifty miles. But if she kept close to the river she could keep a look out for a boat.

If only she hadn't been forced to leave her helmet back on the launch she could have radioed Cloudbase—

She checked. The launch! Why hadn't she thought of that before? If the Mysteron who had been Captain Alvarez had set the auto-pilot before he followed her into the cabin, the crewless launch would have carried on until stopped by some obstruction—or holed and sunk by the sharp bough of a drifting tree trunk.

Eagerly now, at frequent intervals she made her way through the mangroves, ignoring the mosquitoes which stabbed viciously at her, and surveyed the river.

At last she saw the launch, its bows embedded fast in the downstream end of the wooded island in mid-river. Nearby, a small school of alligators basked on a mud bank.

She stood there on the oozing mud, estimating the distance. Maybe two hundred yards. It might as well be two hundred miles, she thought bitterly.

As a swim, two hundred yards was nothing—but in piranha and alligator infested waters it was another matter. It would be foolhardy. She would not help Spectrum by voluntarily offering herself as piranha bait. They might not attack unless they scented blood, but she dare not take the risk.

But if there were some means of getting out there—perhaps a tree trunk she could use as a canoe? She had a knife. If she cut vines and bound some

saplings together to make a raft—

That was it! If she made the raft well upriver, she could float down on the current towards the island, steering it with a paddle she could carve.

Eagerly she turned to make her way back to the path—and found herself staring into the dark yellow-rimmed eyes of an Indian, with red tribal marks on his cheeks and red and orange feathers in his black hair.

He peered at her for a long moment through the undergrowth, then straightened, pointing a spear at her, his dark face inscrutable.

Her throat contracted. She remembered what Tanya Nikita had said about her having a pretty head.

CHAPTER 8

Rhapsody Gets Her Man

RHAPSODY STOOD RIGID, staring at the Indian. He was naked to the waist, his lean brown body powerfully muscled. Was he an Auca—a member of that sinister tribe of headhunters against whom Tanya Nikita had warned her?

She tried to keep all fear from her face. It wasn't easy. The only weapon she had was the knife in her thigh pocket—her gun was on the launch. And what use was a knife against that wickedly pointed spear levelled at her heart? Forcing a smile, she made a gesture that conveyed, she hoped, that she was friendly. His stolid face showed no reaction. The spear didn't move. But at least he didn't throw it at her or move nearer.

A little more confident, she risked taking her eyes from him and gestured towards the launch stuck on the island, then pointed to herself, and made a series of miming movements to indicate that she had come from the launch and wanted to get back to it.

He looked long and hard at the launch, but whether he understood what she meant she couldn't tell.

Then he moved forward out of the bushes and approached her slowly. She stood perfectly still—to show signs of panic might be fatal. But then it dawned on her that he was not too sure of himself, that he was as wary as she was, yet in a different way. Strange as it seemed, it was almost as if he stood a little in awe of her.

He stopped a yard from her. He was taller than she was, tall for a jungle Indian, she thought, and now he was close she could see that his hair had a strange reddish, almost coppery, glint to it. His powerful chest, daubed with

streaks of vermilion paint, glistened with sweat, and she was conscious of a smell like that of old leather.

Suddenly he lowered his spear to the mud, and stretched out his other hand tentatively towards her head. She stood stock still, gazing into his eyes. That was where one could read the first sign of vicious intent. But the lowering of the spear and that almost deferential approach had heartened her.

Then to her surprise he touched her long damp hair, feeling its silky sheen, letting the strands run through his dark stubby fingers as if he experienced pleasure from the sensation. He let her hair fall back on her shoulders, then turned and gestured with his spear through the trees towards the jungle track, grunting gutturally, as if indicating that she should precede him.

She told herself she had no choice but to obey. The only alternative was to dive into the river—and she felt she would rather take her chance with this Indian than with the piranha and alligators. But she felt her back muscles crawl as she preceded him through the trees. One quick thrust of that spear—and what? Would her head, with its golden hair that he had admired so much, finish up as a wizened doll's head in his hut?

But when nothing happened her fear began to recede. Glancing round, she saw that the Indian was walking a few paces behind her and his spear was being used as a staff, not threatening her.

When they reached the track, he gestured up river and grunted, indicating that she should hurry.

For over an hour they moved through the sweltering heat of the jungle. According to the compass on her watch they were travelling south by west, away from the river and the launch which was her one link with civilization.

It said a great deal for the rigorous Spectrum training that she was able to maintain the fast pace that the Indian set.

But she felt almost all in when at last they emerged into a clearing on the bank of a smaller river, where there was a small cluster of Indian bark and palm leaf huts. About them played naked Indian children, while women squatted by a fire preparing a meal. They left what they were doing and stared curiously as Rhapsody appeared with her captor.

The men of the small tribe, who had been repairing frail bark canoes at the water's edge, joined them, gutturally questioning her captor. The women and children began jabbering excitedly and pointing to her and Rhapsody realised that it was her hair that seemed to be the cause of the excitement. Again she found herself remembering, with a stab of apprehension, what the museum attendant had told her about the missionary finding a shrunken head with long golden hair like hers.

Then she saw something that dispelled her fear.

Beyond the huts, close to the jungle's edge, stood a white tent, and emerging from it was a gaunt, blonde-bearded white man with a rugged kindly face tanned by the tropical sun. He wore a white shirt, and trousers tucked into calf high boots.

He approached, thrusting his way gently through the excited Indians, regarding her in amazement.

"Spectrum!" he said incredulously.

He added something in Russian, a language which she recognised but did not understand, and her heart leapt.

"Are—are you Doctor Kholchak?" she asked in English.

He smiled and inclined his head. "I have that doubtful distinction," he replied in good English. "But how is it that one of Spectrum's Angels miraculously appears? Has your plane crashed?"



“No, sir.” She fumbled in her pocket for the teletyped message Colonel White had instructed her to give to Doctor Kholchak if she found him. “This will explain everything, Doctor.”

He took it, started to read, then stopped with an apologetic smile.

“But I forget my party manners. I am so long in the jungle, my dear. You look hot and tired and in need of refreshment. Come to my tent. It won’t take long to brew some tea.”

“It’s very kind of you,” she said with a weary smile.

“Not at all. I am flattered by having such a charming guest to share my humble hospitality, and honoured to receive a visit from a member of Spectrum. Come!”

As he conducted her towards the tent, with the villagers following at a respectful distance, he questioned, in the Indian's own language, the man

who had brought her there, and whom she realised now had been a guide rather than a captor. She saw that the man seemed to make frequent references to her hair.

In the tent, there was a bunk and a folding table with a microscope on it. Racks of specimen cases stood at the far end.

Doctor Kholchak gave her a comfortable camp armchair and set a kettle singing on a pressure stove. As he prepared the tea, he questioned her. She told him the whole story of her adventure from the time she had left his assistant at the laboratory at Iquitos until the Indian had found her.

“Amu believed you were a kind of goddess, especially as you appeared from nowhere. I’m going to let them think that way, for the time being. You see, there is a legend in their tribe that in the remote past a fair-haired race of godlike people ruled this country and that when they went away they promised to return to bring untold blessings. Might well be a legend handed down from the time of the Conquistadores.” He chuckled and stroked his blonde beard. “This makes me a number one God. That’s why I get on so well with them. But they have been known to kill white people on sight.”

He poured tea and handed her biscuits. As she drank gratefully, he sat on the bunk and read the dispatch Colonel White had sent.

She was conscious of curious brown faces peering in at the tent entrance, and smiled to herself. A goddess. Gee, this was really something to tell the others!

Doctor Kholchak finished reading the dispatch and looked up gravely at her.

“Things are as bad as that in the Sahara? A terrible thing. So many years of planning and unremitting labour—to be wasted because of the fiendish desire for revenge of these Mysterons.”

“Can you help, Doctor?” she asked anxiously. “Colonel White thought it was a long shot, but...”

“Relax, my dear!” He stood up and patted her shoulder with a fatherly gesture. “The long shot has found its target. I believe there is a more powerful force than even the Mysterons that controls our destinies at times.”

He went to his cabinets at the end of the tent and came back with a sealed metal capsule.

“Here is the answer to Culture XO.”

She came eagerly to her feet. “The bacteriophage?”

“No.”

“But Doctor Sneddon said before he died that was the only hope...”

“Poor Sneddon was barking up the wrong tree—I think it is the way you express it in your country, my dear. He was seeking a purely biological counter-agent—a parasite that would feed on the organisms in Culture XO. During my days here in the jungle I have occupied my mind with the problem, have experimented freely—yes, I have some Culture XO with me—and I have found a biochemical answer. This solution made in sufficient quantities and introduced into water that is contaminated with Culture XO will utterly destroy it.

“Gosh, that’s wonderful, sir!”

“I shall give you the Formula to radio to your chief, so that your chemists can start manufacturing it immediately.”

“But my radio—it’s in my helmet back on the launch.”

“Wait here!”

He went outside and spoke rapidly to the men. Antu, the man who had brought her and some others ran down to the beach and pushed off in a bark canoe, paddling rapidly downstream.

Doctor Kholchak came back to the tent.

“Within the hour they will be back with your helmet. Meanwhile there is nothing you can do.” He indicated the bunk. “I suggest you get some rest—you look very tired. While you sleep, I’ll write a report for Colonel White.”

Colonel White listened eagerly as Rhapsody’s voice came over the monitor speaker in the Cloudbase Control Room.

“Great work, Rhapsody,” he said. “Just read out Doctor Kholchak’s report and we’ll have it recorded and auto-transmitted to the laboratories. We’ll make so much of the stuff that if the Mysterons contaminate every lake and river on the planet we’ll be able to fight back.”

When the report had been recorded and played back twice as a check for accuracy, Colonel White radioed Rhapsody again.

“Lieutenant Viridian is less than an hour away from your position. I’ve ordered him to go straight there. That will save you from making a jungle journey to Curaco. He’ll take you back to Iquitos and you can pick up your plane and be back here within a few hours.”

“Gosh, does that sound good!” Rhapsody sighed. “Can I do with a hot bath! Right now I can’t think of a greater luxury.”

“Be seeing you!” he chuckled. “And Rhapsody?”

“Sir?”

“We’re all mighty proud of you—and very grateful!”

In Doctor Kholchak’s tent, Rhapsody smiled happily as she closed the radio channel of her helmet.

She told the doctor what Colonel White had said.

“Good,” he said. “But I doubt if production on such a large scale will be necessary, my dear. Once the Mysterons learn that you have one counter agent they will not persevere with Culture XO, I’m sure.”

“That is certainly the way their minds seem to work,” Rhapsody agreed. “They throw down the challenge and if we counter any move, they switch to another.”

“But usually one that has already been pre-arranged, I understand.”

“That’s so, sir. But I feel this must be the end of this particular campaign against Earth. There surely can’t be anything which could be more of a menace to world food supplies than Culture XO—and such a thing could surely only be discovered once in a generation.”

Doctor Kholchak regarded her thoughtfully, stroking his blonde beard. “H’m, I suppose so, my dear,” he said doubtfully. Then he stood up. “How about more tea? A farewell beverage—a stirrup cup as it were to speed you on your way.”

“I’d love one,” she smiled.

When he’d made the tea, he raised his cup, with a smile.

“A toast to Spectrum—and confusion to the Mysterons!”

She laughed and chinked her cup against his.

An hour later Lieutenant Viridian arrived in the SPV. The natives fled to the bushes and peered out fearfully at the ten-wheeled armoured monster with its wide headlamp visor looking like gigantic bared teeth in a reptilian snout.

Doctor Kholchak shook hands with Rhapsody as she strapped herself into the seat on the open door.

“Goodbye, my dear,” he said tenderly. “It may be that we shall never meet again.”

“I hope we do, Doctor,” she smiled. “So I’ll just say *au revoir!*”

The door closed and the huge vehicle lumbered away to swathe its own path through the jungle. Little could withstand it.

When it had vanished, Doctor Kholchak walked slowly back to his tent, his bearded face working strangely, oblivious of the natives creeping back from the undergrowth, oblivious too of the angry glances that some of the men directed at him. He went to his cabinet and unlocked a drawer, took out a sealed phial, filled with a viscous purple fluid.

“The discovery of the age,” he murmured. “With this jungles could be cleared—even the vast green wilderness of Amazonia could be conquered and made to produce food for Man. But it is too dangerous to keep. If the Mysterons should have learned of it...”

There was an angry commotion outside the tent. He turned and went out. The whole tribe was gathered there. Antu, the man who had brought Rhapsody to the village, was arguing with some of the other men.

“Silence!” the doctor shouted in their tongue.

They fell silent, looking at the great blonde man filling the entrance to the tent. But many were scowling. He did not understand it. They had always been so friendly.

“What is the matter, Antu?” he demanded.

The Indian gestured at the men with whom he had been arguing.

“They say you let the monster from the jungle devour the goddess with the hair of gold. They are angry.”

He laughed. “They are foolish, Antu! She is not—”

His voice died away in a gasp as a poisoned spear whistled from the crowd and penetrated his heart. He fell to the ground, and the phial of purple fluid rolled away to the feet of Antu.

For a long moment there was a shocked silence. Then, from the sky a weird green ray probed down and what seemed to the petrified Indians to be two green eyes passed slowly over the dead figure of Doctor Kholchak.

The next instant the Mysterons had taken the chance they had been waiting for. Retro-metabolism had again taken place. The doctor was now a Mysteron. He fixed the Indians with soulless cold blue eyes.

“AIEEEEE!”

With screams of terror the Indians turned and fled into the jungle.

From the air an eerie voice echoed through the jungle.

“YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO, DOCTOR KHOLCHAK?”

“I know,” he said tonelessly.

And, picking up the phial of purple fluid that his human body had dropped, he walked off into the jungle without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 9

Symphony Takes the Night Watch

THE AMBER ROOM on Cloudbase was gay with music and laughter. Captain Scarlet grinned as he wriggled and swayed in the contortions of the latest beat craze that Destiny was trying to teach him.

Rhapsody, carrying a tray of drinks, stopped before Colonel White with a smile.

“Sherry, sir? Or perhaps you’d like to try this new South American wine?”

“That would be most appropriate to the occasion, I think, my dear!” the Spectrum chief smiled, taking the glass.

Over a week had passed now since Rhapsody had radioed that vital formula from South America. Yesterday, the final report had come in from the WFO laboratories. The last trace of the deadly Culture XO had vanished from the waters below the Sahara. The Mysteron threat had been completely dispelled.

To celebrate the occasion, the Angels had obtained the Colonel’s permission to throw a party in the Amber Room. Only Symphony, on standby duty in the cockpit of her strike craft on the launch deck, and Lieutenant Green on duty at the computer in the control room high above, were absent. But they would be relieved by others later so that they could share the fun.

Colonel White took advantage of the break in the music to stand up, his glass raised.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he announced, with a smile which had a touch of something akin to fatherly pride as he surveyed the eager young faces before him. “A toast!”

They reached for their drinks.

“To Spectrum and all who serve it! And to our eventual triumph over the Mysterons! We are achieving an ever increasing ratio of victories to defeats—thanks to the devotion to duty of you and your colleagues throughout the world...”

A red light flashed and a buzzer sounded and over the intercom came the terse voice of Lieutenant Green.

“Control room to Colonel White! Will you please come up, sir. It’s urgent!”

An uneasy silence fell on the room. Colonel White put down his drink, his craggy face tense.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” he said quietly, and left the room.

Destiny looked quizzically at Captain Scarlet. “What does this mean, *mon ami*?”

“What else but Myseron trouble? Lieutenant Green wouldn’t have interrupted the party for anything less urgent.”

“But there was no threat...”

“Does there have to be—if it’s merely a further move in the same campaign?”

“*Sacre bleu!*” She stared at him. “But that is all over!” She spread her hands expressively at the room, slopping her drink unheeded. “What is this party for?”

He smiled wryly. “Just to prove that you never know where you are with the Mysterons, I guess—that you can never count your chickens before they’re not only hatched but laying eggs for themselves.”

In the control room Lieutenant Green greeted the Colonel eagerly.

“Sorry to drag you away from the party, sir, but Agent 953 has just come through with a mighty strange story. I’ve got him holding on.”

The Colonel frowned at a big wall chart. “Nine-five-three? That’s Western Canada, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. North of Calgary. He’s a store keeper in a small settlement called Kicking Horse.”

“S.I.G. Put him through.”

The Colonel sat down at his horseshoe desk and flicked a switch.

“Colonel White to Agent 953. Come in, please.”

“Sir!” The man’s voice was agitated. “Something mighty queer’s happening in this neck of the woods. I guess it needs Spectrum investigation.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, 953. Please give me the facts.”

“A guy drove in here a few minutes ago looking like he’s seen a ghost. He’s a wheat farmer in the foothills. He said that when he went out at sun-up this morning, two hundred acres of half-grown wheat had vanished.”

Colonel White frowned. “Vanished? You mean someone had reaped it in the night?” .

“Jeapers! Why should anyone want to reap two hundred acres of unripe wheat sir? Even the latest combine couldn’t reap it that fast, anyway, without someone hearing it. No, Colonel, this stuff had completely vanished—there wasn’t even any stubble of weeds left. The ground was just bare, as if it had been ploughed and harrowed to a fine tilth ready for sowing again.”

“The police have been informed?”

“Sure, a Mountie patrol’s out there right now, scratching their heads. A state agricultural expert is on the way. It looks mighty suspicious to me, sir.”

“Thanks, 953.”

The Colonel switched off and sat back, staring thoughtfully before him.

“Well, sir?” Lieutenant Green asked anxiously. “What do you think?”

“That we may have big trouble on our hands, Lieutenant. If we won’t countenance the supernatural, we must immediately suspect the Mysterons when something seemingly impossible happens like this. Sound a red alert. Immediate launch Symphony Angel!”

“Yes, sir!”

A red light flashed on Symphony’s control panel.

“Control room to Symphony Angel. Immediate launch. Course W73. Briefing follows when airborne.”

“S.I.G.”

She fired her engines and the strike craft catapulted off the launch deck into the stratosphere, banked, and screamed due west towards the grey green sun-gilded waste of the Atlantic.

Symphony spoke into her helmet microphone.

“Airborne on specified flight course. Awaiting orders.”

“Now listen carefully to this, Symphony,” replied the voice of Colonel White.

He played to her the tape recording of the report of Agent 953, and it was automatically recorded for her future reference.

“You will proceed at maximum speed to Kicking Horse,” the Colonel went on. “You will contact Agent 953, and gather any further facts you can from him. Then you will investigate this phenomenon of the vanishing wheat. Your radio channel will be 063, your code call Cereal Zero. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It may be what we fear—there might be some simple natural explanation that so far has escaped notice. But we can take no chances. Good luck, Symphony!”

Back in the control room, Colonel White spoke to Lieutenant Green.

“Put Angels Two, Three, Four and Five on permanent standby, Lieutenant.”

Two hours later, Symphony was hurtling at five thousand feet above the great Canadian wheat belt, stretching like a vast green ocean towards the bulk of the blue-grey Rockies.

Towns, gleaming white in the morning sun, small settlements, isolated farmhouses, flashed beneath her. Pale ribbons of highways cut through the millions of acres of growing wheat. Down there all seemed as usual in one of the world’s great granaries—and yet—on its wild western fringe, if the report to Cloudbase had not been exaggerated, something weird was happening that could perhaps be as great a menace to the world’s vital grain harvest as Culture XO had been. A few minutes later, Symphony located the settlement of Kicking Horse, tucked in a fold of the grey-green foothills on a winding road into the mountains that led to the ancient pass of the same name. She radioed her position to Cloudbase and zoomed down.

The settlement was just a handful of white buildings, most of them timber. Outside was an airstrip, on which stood a number of small planes and helijets.

She signalled her intention to land and touched down lightly on a clear runway at the edge of the field.

A tall gangling middle aged man, in jeans and checkered shirt and wide brimmed white hat, ambled across to her as she cut the engine and slid back the transparent cockpit cover.

He thumbed his big hat with rough courtesy. "Name's Hennessey," he drawled, "Spectrum Agent 953. Headquarters radioed you were on your way."

She climbed out, closed the cockpit and held out her hand. "Sure glad to know you, Mister Hennessey."

"Just call me Al, miss." His grin was infectious. "Say, are you Canadian too?"

"American—from Iowa."

"Yeah? Well I guess we speak the same language, anyway. You ain't no stranger to Wheat country, huh?"

"No."

She glanced at two police officers whose uniforms, particularly the wide brimmed hats, showed a distinct likeness of the old Mounties. Behind them was a small group in civilian clothes, some carrying cameras.

"I'd like the plane guarded, Al."

"Sure. I already fixed it with the cops. But I'm afraid the reporters are already on to this, miss." The two police officers saluted Symphony and took up positions guarding the plane. The reporters jostled around Symphony, snapping her against the background of the plane, and shooting questions at her.

"No comment, boys," she said. "This is just a routine check. If you want any further information you must wait for the official Cloudbase handouts." They accepted that grudgingly. They had to. Spectrum was a law unto itself, subject to the overriding decisions of the World President, and any attempt to break a Spectrum security net incurred heavy penalties.

"Come on, miss," Hennessey said. "I've got a jeep. I'll take you out to the scene of the mystery."

She climbed into the front seat beside him and he swung the jeep off the airfield and along the single dusty main street of the settlement. Cars and jeeps and small trucks lined the street, stoutly-built vehicles that could tackle the roads and trails of the foothills, still pretty rough even in this seventh decade of the twenty-first century. Journeys of any distance, such as to Calgary or Edmonton, the two great towns of the wheat belt, were mostly made by air.

Passers-by gazed curiously at Symphony.

“Kicking Horse!” she said. “Sure is a romantic name, Al!”

“Yeah. Named after an Indian Chief who—”

“Stop, Al!”

He slammed on the air brakes, stopping the jeep in the centre of the road.

“What’s wrong, miss?”

She pointed to a tall gaunt blonde-bearded man in jeans and zip jacket and slouch hat, who was just getting out of a jeep down the street.

“Who’s that man?”

“Dunno, miss. Can't say I've seen him around before. Could be a prospector from the hills in for supplies. We still get a lot of guys like that looking for gold. Why d’you ask?”

“He looks kind of familiar. Wait here!”

Symphony alighted and crossed the street. The man certainly looked as though he might be a prospector. He had tools on the back of the jeep and he was carrying a food sack towards a provision store when she reached him.

“Excuse me!” she said, smiling.

He stopped, towering over her, regarding her with expressionless blue eyes. Even her uniform did not spark off surprise or interest in him. Yet the

conviction that she knew his face was strengthened.

“You’re Doctor Kholchak, aren’t you?”

He stared at her stolidly. “Kholchak?” his voice was flat, expressionless like his eyes. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

He brushed past her and entered the store. She gazed after him puzzledly, then returned to Hennessey, and told him to drive on.

“He wasn’t the guy you figured he was?” he asked, as they left the settlement.

“I’m not sure. The man I was thinking of should be thousands of miles away...”

She spoke into the helmet microphone. “Open Channel 063. Operation Cereal Zero. Colonel White, please.”

The jeep took a narrow rutted road, little more than a dirt track, that dived into the hills.

“What is it, Symphony?” Colonel White asked.

She described her encounter with the blonde-bearded man.

“I’ve never met Doctor Kholchak personally, sir,” she went on, “but his photograph has been in the papers and on the video enough lately.”

“Sure. He’s as much an international hero as the members of Spectrum since he came up with the answer to the Culture XO problem. But you must have been mistaken, Symphony. Kholchak’s still in the Amazon jungle.”

“How can we be sure of that, sir? He remains out of touch with his assistant at Iquitos for weeks on end. He might still be carrying out his research there—or he might not.”

There was a pause, and then the Colonel spoke tersely. “What are you suggesting, Symphony—that Kholchak has been Mysteronised?”

“Can you think of a better answer, sir—especially as there’s something queer going on out here. It seems too much of a coincidence...”

“You could be right, Symphony, but—Carry on with your investigation. I’ll make inquiries about Kholchak. We don’t want to be diverted by red herrings. That would suit the Mysterons’ book—if they are behind this business. But keep your eyes skinned for him, of course.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

Symphony switched off. The jeep was out of sight of the town now, bucketing along a rough road between thorny scrub.

“If you’re suspicious about that old guy back there, miss,” said Hennessey, “we could have him picked up by the cops.”

“That wouldn’t be much help, Al. If I’ve made a mistake, it would just be a waste of time, apart from doing an injustice to an innocent man. If I’m right—well, we’d tip off the Mysterons that we were on to them. Maybe it’s better to play it the Colonel’s way.”

In the Control Room at Cloudbase, Colonel White spoke softly to Lieutenant Green.

“Check with Miss Nikita at Iquitos. Try to ascertain if Doctor Kholchak is still in the jungle.”

Half an hour after Symphony and Hennessey had taken the road through the foothills, the blonde-bearded man, whom Symphony had challenged, left the settlement of Kicking Horse and drove slowly in the same direction. His face was an inscrutable mask, his blue eyes cold. He might have been a humanoid robot for all the notice he took of the wild countryside about him.

Where the trail passed through a dry gully, a dark figure stepped from the brush ahead of the jeep. It stopped and the man at the wheel waited for the other to approach. The fact that the other man was wearing a black Spectrum uniform occasioned the bearded man no surprise.

“Did the experiment succeed, Doctor Kholchak?”

“Yes, Captain Black. The results were as I expected. The Earthmen are completely mystified.”

“Naturally. They have experienced nothing like this before, Doctor Kholchak. Thanks to your human self they found the answer to Culture XO. It is just that their ultimate defeat should also be due to you.”

“Yes, Captain Black. But...”

“Well?”

“A Spectrum Angel has arrived.”

“We are aware of it. We expected Spectrum to be alerted. It is part of our war of nerves that they shall know part of our plans and be forced to try to counter them. But this time they will fail.”

“The girl recognised me as Doctor Kholchak.”

Captain Black’s dark eyes narrowed, but no muscle of his ashen face moved. “So? That is unfortunate. We did not wish them to learn so much. Spectrum may see some connection between you and what is happening. They may discover you are now a Mysteron agent and seek to destroy you. You must expedite the operation.”

“It shall be done. I shall be ready tonight.”

“It is well. Our Masters on Mars will be pleased with you, Doctor Kholchak. You have proved a valuable asset in our fight against the accursed Earth people who so wantonly attacked us.”

Captain Black turned and vanished into the brush. The man who had been Doctor Kholchak drove on into the hills.

When Symphony and Hennessey arrived in the valley where the stricken farm was, they found a small group of people out on the great bare brown field which at sundown the previous day had been lush with green corn. They jolted out in the jeep to join them. There was a state department biologist from Calgary and his young assistant; the farmer himself, Jud

McCrae; a couple of bored newsmen; and a neighbour, Jim Regan, who farmed the lower end of the valley.

“Well, I sure hope Spectrum can come up with the answer to this one, miss,” MacCrae growled when Hennessey introduced Symphony. “I never seen anything like it. Just as though someone went over my field in the night with a super weed killer.”

“Yeah, but a weed killer would have left some trace,” said Regan. “It might have withered the corn but it would still be there, so would the roots. But there’s nothing!” He kicked the loose clean soil. “What I don’t understand is why Jud’s field was picked as clean as a whistle, and yet mine beyond the stream is untouched.”

“Seems to cut out a chemical spray—even if we can imagine one so drastic,” said the biologist. “There was a breeze blowing down valley last night, you say, yet your crops aren’t even touched.”

“Sure,” said Regan. “It’s mighty queer. Seems like Mysteron work to me—but why only one field? They usually operate on a big scale.”

“Yeah,” growled McCrae. “Why pick on a small guy like me instead of the big wheat corporations?”

“You’ve found absolutely nothing to give us a clue, sir?” Symphony asked the biologist.

“No. I’ve analysed samples of soil from various parts of the field. There are no alien chemicals or antibodies that would destroy crops. Besides, nothing known to us could have worked so quickly and effectively—ruthlessly would be a better word.”

He frowned. “But there’s another strange aspect. The ground has been rendered completely sterile. There is not an insect in it—not even ants, which have a high resistance to most things as you know. There aren’t even any dead insects.”

Symphony stared at him. “You mean they’ve been devoured?”

“Either that or they fled before—well, whatever did this! This ground is now as sterile, I’d say, as the soil of Carthage was after the Romans had sown it with salt. I doubt if crops can be grown in it for years.”

“But salt didn’t do this?”

“No. It’s an effective weedkiller in its own right—but there’s no trace of it in the soil. Frankly, I’m taking these samples back to the laboratory. Maybe further tests will reveal something, but I’m not hopeful.”

“You’ll let Spectrum know the results of those tests, sir?”

“Of course.”

When the others returned to the farmhouse, Symphony and Hennessey made their own examination of the field, but found nothing to account for the mysterious denudation.

“The Mysterons have the power to destroy from space,” Symphony said. “Intense radiation might have destroyed all life on this field and left it sterile...”

“But then there would have been evidence of radioactivity wouldn’t there, miss?”

“Exactly, Al. Besides, the Mysterons don’t act that way. If they did they could have wiped out life on Earth already. It’s my hunch there’s a biological explanation to this. Doctor Kholchak is—or was—a biologist.”

They got through the wire fence that McCrae had erected to keep out wild horses from the hills. On the slopes beyond the fence the soil was sandy, with a few stunted trees and clumps of yellowing grass, and rocks thick with grey and yellow and purple lichen.

But again they found nothing to account for what had happened to that field of wheat. They circled the field and returned to the jeep. Symphony radioed Cloudbase, reporting to Colonel White.

“The only thing that’s certain, sir,” she added, “is that something strange—out of this world, I was going to say—happened here last night. With your permission I’d like to keep observation out here tonight.”

“You think something might happen to that other field?”

“If it does, I’d like to be here to see it.”

“It’s worth trying Symphony. D’you want assistance?”

“No. Hennessey will stay with me.”

“All right. But remember, Symphony—if there is anything there, it appears to devour everything it touches.”

A tiny finger of ice touched her spine.

“I know that, sir, but I still want to stay.”

“S.I.G. Good luck!”

The farmer’s wife gave them a hot supper. McCrae and Regan offered to watch with them, but Symphony declined. She wanted to be free to make her own observations and draw her own conclusions unharrassed by men who might panic in the face of the unknown. Hennessey she could trust.

They drove out at sundown and parked the jeep beside the stream that divided McCrae’s farm from Regan’s. It was already cold up here in the foothills, but Mrs McCrae had provided them with blankets and flasks.

For a while they talked, but then fell silent. They wanted to listen as well as watch. The only sound was the gurgle of the stream and the occasional call of a night bird.

Presently the moon came up over the low hills to the east, a great moon that cast a ghostly light over the valley and turned it into a patchwork of silver and sinister shadows. Frost glistened on the rocks. With a little shiver, Symphony pulled the blanket closer about her legs.

The minutes dragged away into hours. In spite of herself, Symphony dozed off just before midnight. Suddenly she felt herself being violently

shaken. Hennessey was shouting hoarsely, panic in his voice. “Look, miss! Look—out there in the field!”

CHAPTER 10

Harmony Finds the Answer

AL HENNESSEY was pointing across the denuded field. Symphony felt her blood run cold. Something was creeping across it, something that glowed faintly like phosphorescence in the moonlight. It had the appearance of a closely bunched flock of dark sheep, a huge flock that spread right across the field.

Creeping was scarcely the word, Symphony thought, it seemed to be moving incredibly fast.

“Switch on the headlights!” she told Hennessey.

With a hand that she sensed was trembling, he groped for the switch. The next instant twin cones of yellow-white light stabbed across the field to splash on that creeping horror. It was a ghastly purplish colour and moved forward with a curious rolling motion. There was something strangely familiar about its appearance, but it wasn’t possible in that light to decide what.

Hennessey snatched out his gun and blazed away at the advancing mass until the magazine was empty. It made no impression. If it was a living thing the bullets did not harm it.

On it came, and now, as the echoes of the shots faded into the hills, Symphony thought she heard a horrifying hissing and sucking sound like retreating waves sucking at shingle on a seashore.

“Jeapers!” Hennessey gulped, his face wild with terror in the light of the headlamps. “Let’s get outa here.”

He triggered the engine. The jeep lurched forward. He swung it into the stream, charged across it, ploughing a swathe through the dark sea of growing corn in Regan's field.

Heart pounding, Symphony looked back. The strange purple flood was pouring over the bank into the stream. In the moonlight she could see it was billowing over the stream, as if its front ranks were forming a platform over which the rest could cross. Up the far bank it rolled, as if pursuing them.

They were rapidly gaining on it. Down the valley they raced. Ahead, Symphony saw the lights were on in Regan's farmhouse.

"We've got to warn them!" she shouted above the roar of the engine. That stuff's filling the valley. It will go right through the house. When you think of what it did to that field..."

"Yeah, I know!" Hennessey said, calmer now. "It didn't even leave dead ants, the guy said. What the heck is it, miss?"

"I'm not guessing, Al," she said grimly. "But if it carries on like this into the main wheat belt, devouring all before it..."

"Sure, you don't have to tell me, miss. It's Mysteron work all right."

Regan and his wife were up and dressed and on the porch, aroused no doubt by the shots. When the jeep came roaring into the yard, Hennessey bawled to them to get out. They grabbed their two children from their beds, wrapped them in blankets and piled into their own truck, preceding the jeep down the valley. Near the mouth, Regan turned into a track leading up a slope to a headland.

There they stopped and watched horrified as the dark flood poured below them through the narrow valley mouth. For several minutes it flowed—and when it had finally vanished into the night, the wide path it had followed lay dark and denuded in the moonlight.

Sick at heart, Symphony spoke into her microphone, reporting to Cloudbase.

Colonel White listened grimly, then said to Lieutenant Green, “Launch all Angels!”

Seconds later, Harmony, Destiny, Melody and Rhapsody were screaming westwards across the Atlantic.

By dawn, having picked up her jet at Kicking Horse, Symphony was patrolling low over the terrain across which the strange menace was advancing. It was out on the open plain now, and travelling more slowly but spreading over a wider area. If it maintained this rate, she thought, in a few days it would have devoured thousands of millions of acres of precious young wheat, and whole settlements and herds of cattle would have to be evacuated.

She reported to Cloudbase.

“Now I can see it more clearly,” she told Colonel White, “it looks like a purplish lichen—like the stuff I saw back on the rocks in the valley where the trouble started.” But she laughed flatly. “But whoever heard of lichen moving—and at several miles an hour, sir?”

“Well, Symphony,” he replied grimly. “A flash report has just come through from the laboratory at Calgary to which a specimen was flown. Apparently it is a lichen. But it’s dynamite to handle—it just goes on growing and growing. Nothing they’ve tried yet will destroy it, although absence of air, as in a vacuum tube, seems to check its growth.”

“Jumping jets! We can’t create a vacuum all about it, sir.”

“No, but we must try everything possible. The rest of the Angel flight will be joining you in a few minutes. You will proceed to attack with atomic missiles the front of this lichen tide—I can’t think of a better word.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

A flare of ruddy light on the horizon attracted Symphony. She flew towards it, saw that some farmhands had started a brush fire in the path of the creeping lichen, hoping to divert it from the buildings of a big farm a few hundred yards to the east.

The flames leapt high, roaring along dry gulleys to create a fierce wall of flame. It would have been an impassable barrier to any living creature. She circled, watching anxiously. This might be the answer.

But the lichen advanced relentlessly to the line of fire, seemed to hesitate like a living thing, and then slowly poured on over the fire, extinguishing it like a blanket of foam. The farmworkers stared, stupefied, and then, as the first tongue of the lichen tide probed towards them, they flung down the tools with which they had built the fire barrier and fled to their jeeps, roaring off with hooters blaring.

Presently Symphony, circling above, saw them evacuating the farm buildings, helping women and children into trucks, driving out livestock. One frightened cow ran towards the oncoming lichen, charged right into it up to her hocks, and then went down. The relentless purple tide flowed right over the hapless creature.

Nauseated, Symphony swung her plane away. So far no humans had been reported caught by the creeping horror that the Mysterons had let loose, but the time might come, she thought bitterly—unless some means could be found to at least check it, if not destroy it.

Her epaulettes flashed and a voice said in her earphones, “Harmony Angel to Symphony Angel. Where are you?”

She gave them her exact location and a few minutes later they rendezvoused at five thousand feet.

Quickly she briefed them.

“Line formation. Peel off and dive to five hundred feet. Rapid fire...!”

She banked and went screaming down, swordfish nose pointing at the forefront of that surging purplish mass.

Down... down... down...

In her mirrors she could see Harmony's plane hurtling down behind her, with the others strung out behind. In the nose of each nestled powerful cannon primed with deadly atomic missiles powerful enough to sink a warship. Surely nothing could withstand such an attack—certainly not an unprotected mass of vegetation.

Down... down... down... The purple heaving mass was rushing up to meet her now. There was no need to get it in her sights. It was too huge a target to miss. They could hit it anywhere—and the more widely dispersed their shots were the more likelihood of blowing this hideous stuff to smithereens. Surely somewhere it must have an intelligence centre. And if by some fortunate chance they could hit that, then surely the rest must die?

Down... down... down... Now!

She stabbed the red button before her four times in rapid succession, levelling out all the time so that her missiles were spaced across the heaving mass. Then she was swinging her plane up and round, streaking away towards the clear blue sky, while Harmony was firing and Rhapsody was screaming down on her tail.

High up, Symphony stalled, levelled out watching the others climbing up after her. Melody, at the rear, was a thousand feet up when the first of the delayed missiles exploded. Explosion after explosion followed in rapid succession. The air churned with a violent turbulence. Flame and dust gouted skywards, dotted with chunks of earth and rock and ragged lumps of matter that looked like giant purple mopheads.

The Angels circled above the scene of devastation, waiting for the dust to settle. Symphony's heart thudded. Surely nothing living could have

survived that holocaust?

As the air cleared, she gave the order to descend. And then, as she neared the ground, she stared in horrified amazement.

The missiles had ripped a great rift through the heart of the lichen mass, yet even as she watched the gap began to close. But that was not the full horror of it.

The pieces of lichen that had been torn out of the general mass by the explosion and had been flung into the untouched corn hundreds of feet ahead, were visibly growing, and moving forward like advanced guards of the general army, devouring as they went, cutting dark channels of death through the living green corn.

And with every yard they were growing... growing...

“Mon dieu!” Destiny gasped over the intercom. “We have just made things worse, *mes enfants*. It is like the apprentice sorcerer who chopped up the magic broom and turned it into a hundred brooms!”

Her heart heavy, Symphony reported to Colonel White.

“It can’t be helped,” he replied. “It had to be tried—but obviously it isn’t the solution. It may be that the radiation from the missiles has stimulated the lichen’s growth. At least we are warned.”

“What now, sir?” asked Symphony.

He hesitated, then said. “Break formation. Patrol separately, keeping observation on the mass, giving warning to people who may be menaced and rendering help where possible. That is all you can do for the present, Angels. We must wait and see what the eggheads can come up with. There must be something that will destroy that nightmare stuff. There’s got to be.”

But, as the day wore on, the hope seemed to fade. The purple mass, creeping on in the wake of that ever growing vanguard that the Angel’s

missiles had created, had carved a sea of dark destruction fifty miles deep into the wheat belt and almost as wide.

Nothing stopped it, even checked it for long. It flowed round walls, over them if they were low enough and its leading edge could get a purchase on it and form a carpet over which the rest could climb. It flowed into rivers and up the far banks. It pushed through woods, devouring the undergrowth as it went, and sending out sorties which climbed the trees themselves to devour the foliage.

Everything that human ingenuity could devise had been thrown into the attack. Troops had been rushed up with flame throwers, firemen with foam hoses. Planes had sprayed the lichen with herbicides and fungicides and acids, and scalding water had been played on it. But all to no avail. Some of the hoped-for remedies just seemed to stimulate the growth of the dread invader.

As he listened to the report coming into Cloudbase control centre, Colonel White said bitterly, “What a boon to mankind this might have been if we could have got possession of whatever has created it instead of the Mysterons.”

“How do you mean, sir?” asked Lieutenant Green.

“Just imagine this turned loose in the Amazonian jungle—with some means of controlling it. The whole vast basin could be cleared and transformed into millions of square miles of productive farmland.”

Little did he know he was echoing the thoughts of Doctor Kholchak when making his decision to destroy the strange purple virus he had discovered, a decision forestalled by his death at the hands of a Mysteron-controlled Indian.

“Ironical, isn’t it?” the Colonel went on with a mirthless smile. “What we really need to combat this thing is a Culture XO.”

It was when the sun was sinking towards the snow capped peaks of the Rockies, that Harmony, patrolling alone towards the northern limit of the now vast sea of purple lichen saw a strange thing.

This was not wheat country, but rough and rocky pasture land that ran up to the timber line. Yet the lichen still moved relentlessly over it, devouring grass and scrub, flowing over the smaller rocks and around the larger.

But here and there, Harmony noticed something that she had not seen elsewhere among that relentless purple tide. There were small patches that were being by-passed, islands that stood out starkly like yellow-white eyelets in a purple sea. She studied them through her glasses. The eyelets were bowl like depressions into which the lichen could easily have flowed yet had not. The soil in them was bare and sparkling in the western sun. Sand? Perhaps, but elsewhere the lichen had flowed over sand.

“Queer,” she thought. “There is something there that the lichen does not like. I wonder—”

It was then that her glasses picked out the child.

At first she thought it was an animal, but when she flew lower she saw that it was a golden haired girl in blue jeans and yellow zip jacket. She was trudging wearily along the dirt track and, with the innocence or wilfulness of her age, was making straight for the creeping horror. A mile or so to the east was a white farmhouse. The girl could have come from there, but surely the people must have been warned to evacuate by now?

Harmony circled to find a flat place to touch down. Suddenly her engine cut out. She tried to fire it again, but there was no response. The plane went into a dive. She juggled with the controls, trying to lift the sharp, pointed nose, to ride an air current long enough to make a crash landing but still she hurtled down.

Eject! It was the only hope. But when she pressed the button nothing happened.

Grimly she juggled again with the controls, trying to keep the nose up. The ground was awfully close now.

She felt the slight response, as the plane came reluctantly out of its death dive. Maybe she could make it even now? Flying almost parallel over the lichen moss, she had a split second in which to make up her mind—to crash land on the rough ground across which that little child was trudging and risking the plane blowing up and killing them both or—

Deliberately she eased the plane towards that purplish mass. At least, she thought grimly, it could cushion the landing.

She pancaked near the edge and the plane ploughed to a stand-still. The stuff seemed like rubber, it had absorbed the shock, leaving her shaken but unhurt. But already it was almost up to the main fuselage, probing two ghastly fingers over the starboard wing.

Steadying herself to keep calm, Harmony spoke into her helmet microphone.

“Harmony Angel to Angel Pack. Have ditched in enemy. Am abandoning craft. Will appreciate help.”

There was no reply. She tried again, but still no response. Was there something given out by this foul lichen stuff that blanketed radio transmission—some form of radiation? In view of what Symphony had reported—that it glowed like phosphorescence in the night—that was possible.

She dared wait no longer. She slid back the transparent cockpit canopy. A strange pungent scent touched her nostrils—almost like sage, she thought.

Climbing out on the port wing, which formed a bridge across the tide of lichen almost to the untouched terrain ahead, she ran along it. Purple fingers were clawing at the edges, reaching the end of the wing. She leapt, landing on all fours at the edge of the lichen, her right foot dragging in it. Even through her boot she was conscious of a clawing, seeking sensation.

Panic touched her. She snatched her foot clear with an effort, scrambling upright, and began to run towards the child who was walking down a grassy slope towards her. She reached her, gathered her up in her arms.

“No, no!” The girl begged, struggling. “Put me down! I have gotta find her. She gotta be ’vacuated like the cows and horses.” She looked up at Harmony with great blue eyes. “My mummy thinks I went on the rescue truck but I runned off. Will you help me to find Beauty, air-lady?”

Harmony glanced back at the lichen which was creeping relentlessly up the grass slope with incredible speed.

“Sure, honey,” she smiled. “I’ll help you to find Beauty. But I saw her go this way,” she lied. “I saw her from my plane. Come on! I will give you a Flying Angel.”

She swung the girl on her shoulders and ran up the slope. Beyond the slight ridge the green levelled out into a low plateau of small rocks and coarse grass and gravel. On and on she ran until her legs felt like lead and her lungs laboured in spite of her training.

She paused and looked back. The lichen was still sweeping on. It looked no nearer, but she could not be sure if she had gained on it. She could not run for long at this pace.

“Gee up!” The girl who had said her name was Nita slapped the helmet as she would a pony’s shoulder. “I wanna find Beauty before it’s dark, air-lady.”



Harmony started to run again. She ploughed through a patch of wiry, tufty grass then stumbled and fell headlong into a shallow depression filled with glistening yellowish-white sand. The surface broke gently under her weight like the frozen crust of a snow drift. Little Nita flew from her shoulders and landed just ahead of her, but the sand broke her fall.

Harmony scrambled to her feet and picked the girl up.

“Ugh!” the girl whimpered. “This is nasty stuff. It tastes all salty and—it stinks.”

Harmony wiped off her finger the crystalline powder that clung to the girl’s chin and tasted it. It was salt alright—almost a pure common salt she thought. So that is what this was—a salt pan! Some freak of nature had created it here on this rough prairie land.

That strange pungent scent touched her nostrils. She looked back. The front of the lichen was appearing above the low ridge.

Swinging Nita on to her back she went on plodding through the salt as if through snow.

At last she was out of it, running on towards the white farmhouse that had appeared some distance ahead. May be they would be safe in the upper storey of that?

A hundred yards from the salt pan she paused again and looked back. The purple tide was flowing about the salt pan instead of through it—it just appeared to have by-passed those strange patches she had seen from the air.

Then the startling truth burst on her. The lichen was allergic to salt—to concentrated common salt.

The wonder of the discovery lent wings to her feet and she raced on towards the farmhouse.

Half an hour later she was in an upper room with Nita, watching the purple tide creeping relentlessly nearer and speaking excitedly into her now functioning helmet microphone.

“Harmony Angel to Cloudbase...”

“Common salt!” Colonel White laughed, as he stood in one of the glass bays of the Cloudbase control room, looking down on the World that had once more been saved from a Mysteron-instigated attack. “Funny, wasn’t it? The scientists used sodium chloride in various solutions being tried on the lichen, but, of course, it was not concentrated enough.”

“But thanks to Harmony we found the answer in time, sir,” said Lieutenant Green. “Millions of acres of wheat may have been destroyed but the loss is not a vital one.”

He broke off as an amber light flashed on the computer before him.

“It’s Harmony Angel, sir,” he went on with a smile. “She respectfully requests on behalf of all Angels permission to resume the Amber Room party that was interrupted by the—er—”

“The Creeping Enemy, Lieutenant.” The Spectrum chief smiled. “Tell her permission granted, Lieutenant. They have earned it.”

THE END

Have you read the other stories by **JOHN THEYDON** in the Armada series?

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STINGRAY AND THE MONSTER

THUNDERBIRDS

CALLING THUNDERBIRDS

THUNDERBIRDS—RING OF FIRE

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Mysterons,
will destroy
the earth's
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**Spectrum explodes into
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**Using all their resources
Melody, Harmony, Destiny,
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drive the Mysterons to
the brink of defeat !**



**But then the enemy strikes
back. An army of plants
masses into attack obeying
the will of its evil masters
and destroying all in
its path !**

**The tables are turned and
this time the Mysterons
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